

AUTHOR OF THE JUPITER MYTH

LINDSEY DAVIS



SCANDAL TAKES
A HOLIDAY

A MARCUS DIDIUS FALCO MYSTERY NOVEL

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Contents

Also by Lindsey Davis

Dedication

Extract from the Family Tree of Marcus Didius Falco

Principal Characters

Ostia, Italy: August, A.D. 76

Chapter I

Chapter II

Chapter III

Chapter IV

Chapter V

Chapter VI

Chapter VII

Chapter VIII

Chapter IX

Chapter X

Chapter XI

Chapter XII

Chapter XIII

Chapter XIV

Chapter XV

Chapter XVI

Chapter XVII

Chapter XVIII

[Chapter XIX](#)

[Chapter XX](#)

[Chapter XXI](#)

[Chapter XXII](#)

[Chapter XXIII](#)

[Chapter XXIV](#)

[Chapter XXV](#)

[Chapter XXVI](#)

[Chapter XXVII](#)

[Chapter XXVIII](#)

[Chapter XXIX](#)

[Chapter XXX](#)

[Chapter XXXI](#)

[Chapter XXXII](#)

[Chapter XXXIII](#)

[Chapter XXXIV](#)

[Chapter XXXV](#)

[Chapter XXXVI](#)

[Chapter XXXVII](#)

[Chapter XXXVIII](#)

[Chapter XXXIX](#)

[Chapter XL](#)

[Chapter XLI](#)

[Chapter XLII](#)

[Chapter XLIII](#)

[Chapter XLIV](#)

[Chapter XLV](#)

[Chapter XLVI](#)

[Chapter XLVII](#)

[Chapter XLVIII](#)

[Chapter XLIX](#)

[Chapter L](#)

[Chapter LI](#)

[Chapter LII](#)

[Chapter LIII](#)

[Chapter LIV](#)

[Chapter LV](#)

[Chapter LVI](#)

[Chapter LVII](#)

[Chapter LVIII](#)

[Chapter LIX](#)

[Chapter LX](#)

[Chapter LXI](#)

[Chapter LXII](#)

[Chapter LXIII](#)

[Chapter LXIV](#)

ALSO BY LINDSEY DAVIS

The Course of Honor

The Falco Series

The Silver Pigs

Shadows in Bronze

Venus in Copper

The Iron Hand of Mars

Poseidon's Gold

Last Act in Palmyra

Time to Depart

A Dying Light in Corduba

Three Hands in the Fountain

Two for the Lions

One Virgin Too Many

Ode to a Banker

A Body in the Bathhouse

The Jupiter Myth

The Accusers

In Memory of Sara Ann Freed

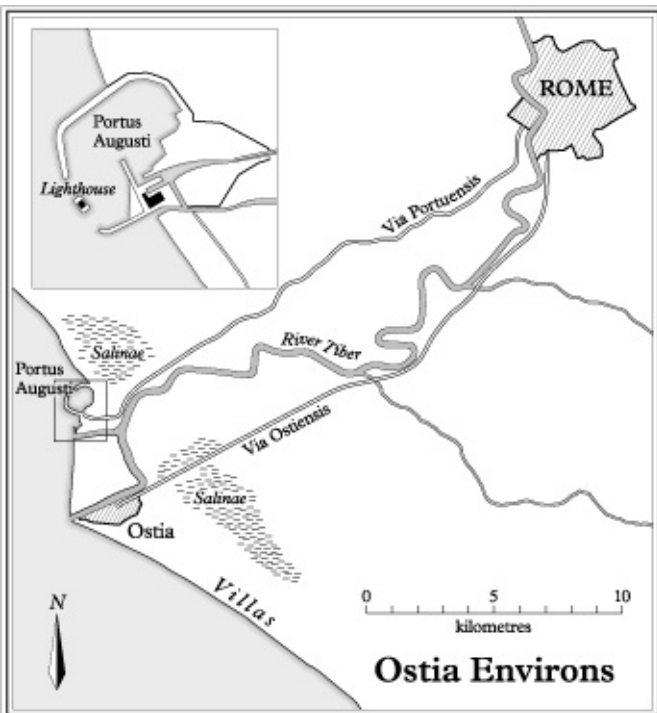
Who are you, sirs? From what port have you sailed over the highways of the sea? Is yours a trading venture, or are you cruising the main on chance, like roving pirates, who risk their lives to ruin other people?

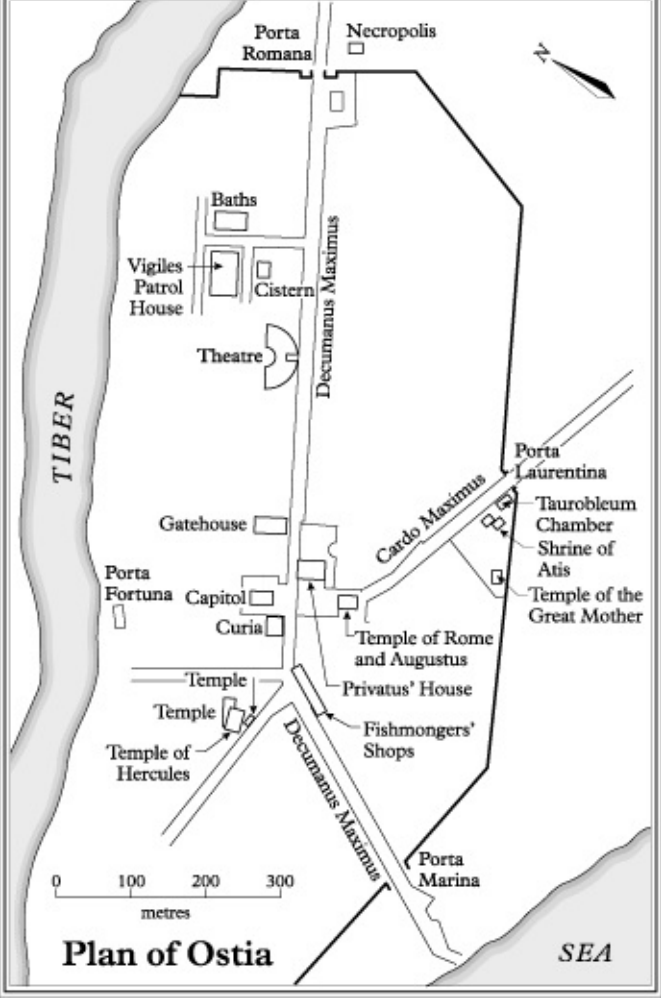
—Homer, *The Odyssey*, tenth century B.C.

Piracy, like crime on terra firma, has its great syndicates and its petty criminals. On the high seas, neither is an easy catch . . . No one, apart from ship owners, their crews and insurers, appears to notice that pirates are assaulting ships at a rate unprecedented since the glorious days when pirates were “privateers” protected by their national governments . . . Piracy is a historical problem . . . It is rooted in these societies . . . Despite all the information now available on piratical attacks, there are hardly any cases where these attackers are arrested and brought to trial. Piracy is a high-profit, low-risk activity.

—Charles Glass, *The New Piracy*, A.D. 2003

MAPS

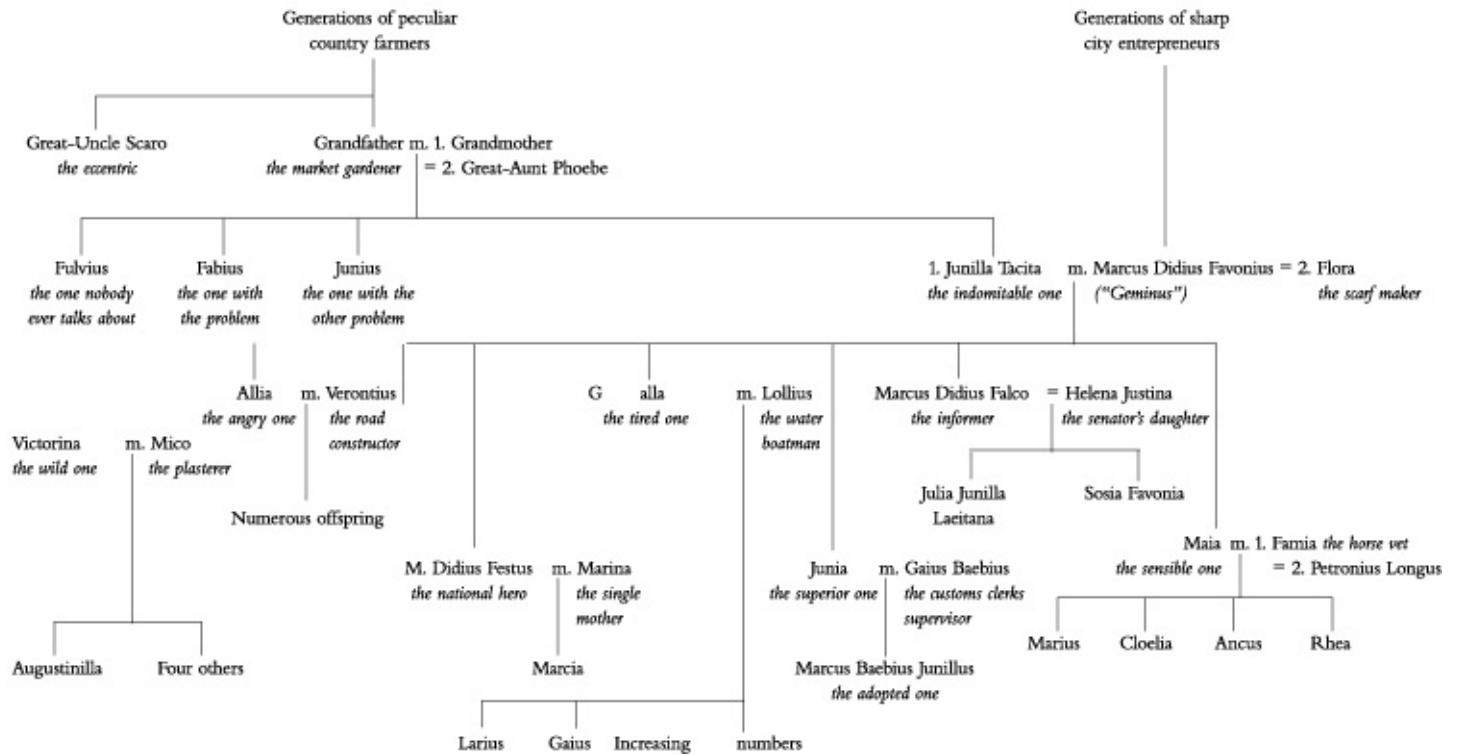




Plan of Ostia

SEA

Extract from the Family Tree of Marcus Didius Falco



PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Relations (see also Family Tree)

M. Didius Falco, an informer on summer vacation
Helena Justina, catching up on her holiday reading
Julia Junilla and Sosia Favonia, their children, struggling for attention
Albia, their British foster child, a treasure
Nux, Ajax, Argos, furry friends in need of training
Ma, rising to difficult situations
Pa (M. Didius Geminus), sinking to new depths
Junia, Falco's sister: the irritating one
Gaius Baebius, her well-matched husband
Maia, another sister: the coping, caring one
Fulvius, an enigma whom nobody talks about
Cassius, a mystery nobody knows about
D. Camillus Verus, Helena's father, an off-duty senator
Julia Justa, her mother, always on the alert over:
A. Camillus Aelianus, her sons: who certainly need
and Q. Camillus Justinus, watching

Staff of the *Daily Gazette*, Rome

Holconius, the political reporter
Mutatus, the sports commentator
Diocles, fun correspondent; a family man
Vestina, his only family

The Vigiles

L. Petronius Longus, on independent secondment (a maverick?)
Brunnus, leader of the VI Cohort's Ostia detachment; a rival
Marcus Rubella, tribune of the IV Cohort, a thinking man
Fusculus, Passus, members of the IV, regular good lads
Virtus, a public slave, the vigiles' Ostia clerk
Rusticus, the vigiles recruiting officer

Persons about town in Ostia

Landlady, double booking

Titus, her slave, a liability

Caninus, a naval attaché; a drinking man

Privatus, president of the builders' guild; fraternizing with Petro

Staff of the Damson Flower

Hotel, the Venus, the Clam,
the Dolphin, the Aquarius, and
other establishments

A fishmonger and his mother

Chaeron, a funeral flautist, who will tackle anything

Colorful overseas businesspeople

Damagoras, an old Cilician, not necessarily a pirate

L*BO, his topiarist, slightly overpruned

Cratidas, a violent Cilician, but innocent, honest

Lygon, another Cilician, but honest, really

Pullia, a mother (from Cilicia) with a bad habit

Zeno, a neglected boy (from Cilicia)

Cotys, an Illyrian, too scrupulous to be a pirate, he says

Theopompus, another Illyrian, in love—no, genuinely

The Illyrian, an intermediary

Antemon, a sea captain who has never met a pirate

Banno, Aline, ship's owners, too scared to admit that piracy happens

Posidonius, an importer, not so scared—but now regretting it

Rhodope, his daughter, who thinks one Illyrian is wonderful

Lemnus from Paphos, just a concrete mixer

Ostia, Italy: August, A.D. 76

I

If he chucks a stone, he's done for," muttered Petronius. "I'll have the little tyke . . ."

It was a hot day along the waterfront at the mouth of the Tiber in Ostia. Petro and I had badly needed a drink. It was so hot we only made it to just outside the vigiles patrol house and into the first bar. This was a sad backtrack. Our principle had always been, "Never go into the first bar you see because it is bound to be rubbish." For the past fifteen years or so, since we met in the queue to enlist for the legions, whenever we sought refreshment we had always strolled a good distance away from home and work, in case we were followed and found. Actually we had sat in numerous bars that were rubbish—but not many that were full of associates we wanted to avoid and very few that our women knew about.

Don't get me wrong. We two were pious Romans with traditional values. Of course we admired our colleagues and adored our womenfolk. Just like old Brutus, any orator could say of us that Marcus Didius Falco and Lucius Petronius Longus were honorable men. And yes; the orator would make that claim with an irony even the most stupid mob would understand . . .

As you can see, in the heat I had drunk up too quickly. I was already rambling. Petronius, the experienced inquiry chief of the Fourth Cohort of Vigiles in Rome, was a measured man. He had his large hand clamped around his wine-shop beaker but his heavy right arm was currently at rest on the warm boards of our sidewalk table while he enjoyed a long, slow descent into tipsiness.

He was here after putting his name down for detached duty. It was a pleasant life—especially since the villain he was waiting for never turned up. I was here to look for someone else—though I had not told Petro.

Ostia, the port for Rome, was vibrant but its vigiles patrol house was falling apart and the bar outside was terrible. The place was little more than a shack leaning against the patrol-house wall. After a fire, the vigiles rankers would block the side street as they crowded around with mugs of liquor, desperate to soothe their raw throats and usually just as desperate to complain about their officers. At present the street was almost empty, so we could squat on two low stools at a tiny table with our legs stuck out across the sidewalk. There were no other customers. The day shift were having a lie-down in the squad house, hoping that nobody set fire to an oily pan in a crowded apartment, or if they did that nobody sounded the alarm.

Petro and I were discussing our work and our women. Being still capable of two things at once, Petronius Longus was also watching the boy. The little lad was too intent; he looked like trouble. A giggling group would be annoying enough. But if this loner did hurl a rock through the doorway of the patrol house, then shout abuse and run away, he would run straight into my old friend.

Mind you, he was only about seven. Petronius would probably not break his arms or legs.

After Petronius had narrowed his eyes and watched for a while, he carried on talking. “So how’s your billet, Falco?”

He was teasing and I scoffed, “I can see why you don’t want to stay in it!”

Petro had been assigned a room inside the Ostia patrol house. He refused to occupy it, but had loaned the grim cell to me this week. We two had had our fill of barracks life when we were in the Second Augusta, our legion in Britain. Even marching camps in that remote province had been better organized than this dump. Ostia was mainly a four-month assignment, on rotation among the seven Rome cohorts; the provision was constantly under review, and it showed.

Off the Decumanus Maximus a short way inside the Rome Gate, the buildings had been thrown up in a hurry three decades ago when Claudius built his new harbor. He first brought some of the rough-and-ready urban cohorts to guard the spanking new warehouses. Fires in the granaries subsequently caused a rethink; they had upped the provision and replaced the urbans, who were general troops, with the more professional vigiles, who were specialist firefighters. Rome’s vital corn supply ought to be safe with them, the people would be fed, the city would be free from riots, and everyone would love the Emperor, who had arranged it all.

The same happened here as in Rome: while on fire watch, especially at night, the vigiles found themselves apprehending not just arsonists but every kind of criminal. Now they policed the port and kept an eye on the town. The Ostians were still trying to get used to it.

Petronius, who knew how to run rings around his superiors, only got involved in day-to-day issues when it suited him. His special operation had no time limit, so he had brought his family with him. Nowadays Petro cohabited with my sister Maia, who had four children, and in Ostia he had a young daughter of his own with whom he wanted contact. To house them all he had managed to fiddle the loan of a mansion, borrowed from a very wealthy local contact of the vigiles. I had not yet worked out the angle there. But as a result, his unwanted room in the patrol house was mine. Lucky me.

“This squadron coop has well outlived its usefulness,” I grumbled. “It’s too small, it’s dark, it’s cramped, plus it’s full of bad memories of villains who have been dragged in through the gate and never seen again. The latrine stinks. There is no cookhouse. Equipment is left all over the exercise yard because every detachment thinks if they are only here for four months they can leave it rotting there for the next group to tidy up.”

“Yes, and there’s mold in a big cistern underground,” Petronius agreed cheekily.

“Oh, thanks. Don’t tell my mother you have stuck me above some stagnant sink.”

“I won’t tell your mother,” he promised, “if you promise not to tell your wife.” He was frightened of Helena Justina. Quite rightly. My high-rank sweetheart had much stricter morals than most senators’ daughters and she knew how to express her views. Petronius faked a contrite look. “Well, the room is rough and I’m sorry, Marcus. But you’re not staying long, are you?”

“Of course not, Lucius, old pal.”

I was lying. Lucius Petronius had welcomed me as if I had just come on a visit to see how he was. I was withholding news of my own commission in Ostia. Last year, when the Emperor sent me to Britain on some murky Palace errands, Petro had followed me out there. Only by chance did I learn that he was the lead player in a serious hunt for a major gangster. It still rankled that he had kept quiet. Now I was paying him back.

He drank his wine. Then he winced. I nodded. It was a filthy vintage.

~~Without a word, Petronius stood up. I stayed put. He walked slowly over to the little lad, who was still motionless outside the gate. They were about five strides from me.~~

“Hello, there.” Petro sounded friendly enough. “What are you up to?”

The small boy had a thin body under a worn tunic. It was fairly clean, a muddy shade, a size too big for him, with one sleeve of a white undertunic showing. He did not look like a native of Ostia. It was impossible to tell his nationality, but the layers of clothes suggested Mediterranean; only crazies from the north strip off in the heat. He wore no belt, though he had beaten-up brown sandals with the straps curled by age. His hair was too long and there were dark circles under his eyes. But he had been fed. He was fit. His was the normal look of a lad from the artisan classes, maybe required to work hard at the family trade and then allowed to stay up far too late on long summer nights.

He stared up at Petronius Longus. What the boy saw was a big man waiting silently with a friendly expression, someone who might throw a beanbag about in an alley with the local children. The boy seemed streetwise yet clearly unaware that this was an officer whose slam-bang interrogation methods were a legend. All vigiles are hard, but Petronius could persuade incorrigible criminals to bleat out damning evidence against their favorite brothers. He could make them do it even if the brothers were innocent, although mostly he did prefer confessions of real guilt.

“What’s your name?” I heard him ask.

“Zeno.” The worst Zeno would suspect was an approach from a pervert. He looked the kind who knew to yell loudly and run.

“I am Petronius. So what’s up, Zeno?”

Zeno said something, very quietly. Then Petro offered his hand and the boy took it. They walked over to me. I was already dropping coins on the table to pay for our wine. I had heard the boy’s answer, and I knew what my friend would do.

“Falco, Zeno says that his mummy won’t wake up.” Petronius hid his foreboding. “Shall we go and see what has happened to her?”

From long experience, he and I reckoned that we knew.

II

The boy led us, with Petronius still gripping his grubby little hand. We walked along the Decumanus Maximus. Ostia was a long habitation, so it had a long and very hot main street. As a major route for trade commodities, it was already packed with an endless line of carts jostling their way out of town, in order to arrive in Rome at sunset as the daily ban on wheeled vehicles ended. We were walking against the traffic. They were heading toward Victory Square and the Rome Gate. In our direction, far ahead and way beyond the Forum, lay the Marine Gate and the open sea. Roads to our left passed through mixed habitation toward the Laurentine Gate, the exit into the lovely countryside on which our forefather Aeneas set his sights. Short roads to the right led to the Tiber. It would be chock-full of boats and ferries, bound for the markets and the great Emporium. Beyond the Tiber lay another road to Rome, which would also be jammed with laden transports, those too all trundling toward the Golden City on the Transtiberina side.

“You’re not from hereabouts,” Petronius probed. “So where is home, Zeno?” Zeno had been trained to look dumb or daft. “Far away?” This time the child let himself nod. “Did you come on a ship?” Too specific: Zeno relapsed into vagueness.

Petro glanced at me over Zeno’s head, then stopped asking. Questions would be better when we had seen whether the unresponsive mother had been battered by her husband or lover or whether (less likely) she had just faded away in her sleep from some natural illness.

We passed the Theater. Opposite that tight-arsed Augustan edifice were various old monuments and guild assembly rooms. Then came a podium holding a neat row of four little temples, all elderly in style, just before the approach road to the massive granary built by Claudius. We stayed on the Decumanus to the end of that block. Then the boy turned right, facing the river. He stopped in front of what had once been a fortified gatehouse, when Ostia was much smaller and much, much older. This would have been the boundary wall of the original settlement. It probably dated back to the supposed founding of the port by Ancus Martius, one of the traditional Kings of Rome. They built to last in those ancient times, using massive square blocks. The stolid gate, made redundant when the town expanded, had now been redeveloped into shops. Above them were a couple of rooms rented to visiting foreigners.

Petronius left Zeno with me; he made a brief inquiry at one of the shops, then went up alone by an outside stair. I sat on the curb alongside the child, who meekly squatted by me.

“Who told you to come to the vigiles for help, Zeno?” I asked nonchalantly, as we pulled in our feet in front of a heavy cart full of marble blocks.

“Lygon told me, *If anyone ever doesn’t wake up, the vigiles will want to know.*”

Lygon instantly became a key suspect. “Is he one of the family?”

“My uncle.” The child looked embarrassed. There are uncles and uncles. Some uncles are no relation, as children understand.

“Where is he at the moment?”

“Gone away on business.”

“When do you think he will come back?”

Zeno shrugged. No surprises there.

Petronius stuck his head out of a window on the top story.

“Come up here, Falco.” He sounded annoyed, not like a man who had just found a domestic tragedy. “You can bring the boy.”

“Sounds as if your mother is all right, Zeno.” We went up.

The gatehouse contained a warren of small rooms, all kept cool by its massive construction. Zeno lived in a cheap let, a single airless room with no amenities. The mother was unconscious on what passed for a bed. It was the only one; Zeno must either sleep with her or on the floor.

She was from the scrag end of womanhood; we had suspected that. She was dressed, in several layers—a traveler who wore all her wardrobe, as a deterrent to theft. The folds of cloth were richer than I expected, though when sleeping it off she wore them in bedraggled swathes. Sprawled face-up on the mattress, she looked sour and middle-aged, but I guessed she was much younger and had fallen pregnant with Zeno in her teens. That was the type of ménage it was. “Uncle” Lygon would be her latest lover; we could guess what he was like: some scrounging swine who was now playing the big fellow in a wine shop by the port. Presumably they both liked a tippie. Zeno’s mother had imbibed so much she had passed out cold. I guessed that was yesterday.

“Drunk as a dog.” Petronius (a cat man) closed her drooling mouth with his thumb. This was a gesture to spare her young son. He wiped his thumb on his tunic at thigh level, with an expression of weary distaste. Much of his working life had been spent among this sad level of society, and he despaired of it.

Had the child been any older, that would have ended our interest. Instead, since my sister was only around the corner in the loaned house, Petro made me stay at the gatehouse while he fetched Maia to sit with the mother until she came around. We would look after Zeno.

Maia was furious to be given this task—but she had children herself. We took Zeno to play with her brood; Petro and I claimed that both of us would need to supervise them. Cursing, Maia stayed behind. Two hours later the woman revived. Maia came home with a ripe black eye, cuffed Zeno around the ears, told him to go and keep his mama out of trouble, then made us feel guilty all that evening.

“Your lush is called Pullia. The family come from Soli, wherever that is. There’s a man no one ever sees much. Pullia is dumped on her own while he goes out and has his fun; she’s bored, but she never leaves the apartment. The child roams the streets. A neighbor in the cushion shop told me.”

“That’s more than I found out,” Petro soothed her admiringly. “I didn’t even notice that it was a cushion shop!”

“Eyesight qualifications don’t apply to the vigiles? Drop the flattery.” Maia and Petro were in love. Happiness had failed to soften the cut and thrust of their repartee. Maia distrusted men who tried to ingratiate themselves and Petro was finding out fast just what he had fallen for.

They were made for each other—though that did not mean this relationship would last. Petronius had always sought out fair-haired women previously—~~apart from his ex-wife~~. Arria Silvia looked a little like Maia, who was dark and smart, with a fiery temper and a brisk manner even when nothing had offended her. My Helena reckoned Petro had married Silvia because Maia was married herself at the time and refused to look at him. I knew Petro, and I could not believe it, but I saw the similarity.

“Do the tipsy family pay their rent?” he asked Maia, pretending he was only making conversation.

“Find out for yourself,” snarled Maia, as she prodded her battered cheekbone.

She was my favorite sister. I made sure Petronius applied soothing liniment to her eye as soon as Maia calmed down enough for him to get near her. I wouldn’t risk it myself.

The feckless folk from Soli were a typical splash of color in the hectic marine society of Ostia. The place was awash with temporary visitors from all ends of the Empire. Attached in some way to nautical trade, they stayed weeks or months, awaiting a cargo, awaiting a payment, awaiting a friend, awaiting a passage. Some found work, though mostly the locals had the jobs and clung on to them. Now that Pullia had had a meeting with officialdom, her little group would probably be up and off.

I was off myself, back to the patrol house. I could have stayed to dinner. The moneybags who had lent Petro the house had left his slaves behind, in accordance with the hospitality rules of the rich. They served up regular meals of excellent quality, for which Petronius was not billed. “The food is here—eat, don’t let it go to waste!” the steward urged. No one needed to be told twice.

It was not for me, however. I was hoping that Helena would arrive that evening. The patrol house was somewhere no well-brought-up young lady would want to find herself alone.

III

A donkey cart was standing outside the gate: Helena had already arrived.

She was just inside the entrance, keeping her cloak tightly around her. In late July it was far too hot for cloaks, but a respectable woman's duty is to be uncomfortable in public. The Sixth Cohort du boys would not have interfered with her, but nobody made her welcome either. The vigiles rankers are ex-slaves, doing a horrid job as the quick route to citizenship; their officers are citizens, normally ex-legionaries, but few and far between.

Helena glanced around the quadrangle, with its many shadowed doorways; they led to equipment stores, the bare cells where the men slept, and the offices where they skillfully brought pressure to bear on witnesses. Even the entrance to the shrine at the far end looked forbidding. As harsh voices sounded loudly from indoors, she flinched. Helena Justina was a tall, spirited girl, who could always fend off trouble by citing her position as a senator's daughter—but she preferred to avoid the trouble in the first place. I had taught her some tactics. She disguised her nervousness, though she was glad to see me.

“Luckily no suspects are screaming in agony just at this moment,” I teased, acknowledging the atmosphere that hung over the yard, especially at dusk. We went to the room I had been using. The false excuse was to fetch my belongings; the true one was to greet my lady privately. I had not seen her for a week. Since everyone I knew swore that she was bound to leave me one day, I had to reinforce my feelings. Besides, I liked getting excited when Helena showed her affection for me.

Even we felt too uneasy there to dally. I promised greater relaxation at an apartment I had found for us.

“Aren't we staying with Lucius and Maia?” Helena was fond of them both.

“Not likely. Petro has been loaned a flash mansion by a damned construction magnate.”

“What's wrong with that?” Helena was smiling. She knew me.

“I hate handouts.” She nodded; I knew she too preferred our family to live quietly, with no obligations to patrons. Most of Rome operates on favors; we two had always made our own way. “But we can go and have a free dinner!” There were limits to my high-mindedness.

Back at the town house, Petro and Maia were already eating in one of their host's frescoed dining rooms. He had several. This was made airy by folding doors, currently flung open onto a small garden.

where a tiled turquoise niche housed a sea god statue. A child's hat was hanging on his conch shell. Small sandals, clay animals, and a homemade chariot littered the garden area.

Space was quickly made for us on the large, cushion-strewn couches. Maia gave us a calculating look, as she rearranged the children: Marius, Cloelia, Ancus, and little Rhea, who were aged between twelve and six, all four of them bright as new carpentry nails, together with Petro's quiet daughter Petronilla, who must be about ten.

"Are you staying or what?" demanded my sister. She and I came from a large, loud, quarrelsome family whose members spent much effort avoiding one another.

"No, we've taken a holiday apartment, just the other side of the Decumanus," I reassured her.

Maia did not want us cluttering up her already busy household, but she went into a huff. "Suit yourselves!"

Petronius came back from stabling Helena's luggage cart. "It looks as if you've come for the rest of the season by the amount you have brought!" he said.

"Oh, it's holiday reading." Helena smiled calmly. "I was rather behind with the *Daily Gazette*, so my father has lent me his old copies."

"Three sacks of scrolls?" Petro asked her, in disbelief. Clearly he had poked through Helena's luggage without shame.

Everyone knew that the strange girl I had chosen would rather have her nose in literature than ten to her two little daughters or walk to the corner market for a mullet and some gossip like a normal Aventine wife. Helena Justina was more likely to neglect me because she was deep in a new Greek play than because she was having a fling with another man. She did tend our daughters in her own fashion; Julia, at three, was already being taught her alphabet. Fortunately I liked eccentric women and was not afraid of forward children. Or so I thought so far.

Helena fixed her gaze on me. "The news all looks rather dull at the moment. The imperial family are at their country estates for the summer—and even Infamia has taken a holiday."

Infamia was the pseudonym of whoever compiled the salacious scandal about senators' wives having affairs with jockeys. I happened to know that Infamia was shifty and unreliable—and if he really had taken a holiday, he had forgotten to clear the dates with his employers.

"If there's no scandal," Maia announced crisply, "then there's absolutely no point in reading the *Gazette*."

Helena smiled. She hated me being devious and was trying to force me to say what I knew. "Infamia must have a hotspot villa somewhere. Think of all his payoffs from people who don't want their secrets told. What do you think, Marcus?"

"Are we missing something?" Maia hated to be left out. She sounded tetchy. Nothing new in that.

"Falco, you rat. Are you down here on one of your crackpot investigations?" demanded Petronius also catching on.

"Lucius, my dearest and oldest friend, when I am commissioned for work, crazy or sane, I shall report it to you immediately—"

"You *are* on a job!"

"I just denied it, Petro."

Petro turned to Maia. "Your tight-lipped bastard brother is hiding a commission in his hairy armpit." He scowled at me, then gave his attention to capturing a tureen of gingered shellfish the children had been scooping up like ravenous gulls. He had to deal with the squeals as they watched him emptying all the good bits into his own food bowl.

"What job?" Maia quizzed me rudely.

“Secret. Clause in my contract says, ‘Don’t tell your nosy sister or that interfering boyfriend of hers.’” I relieved Petro of his trophy and served Helena and myself the last prawns.

Maia snatched one from my bowl. “Grow up, Marcus!”

Ah, family life. I wondered if the man I had come to look for had any close relations. When you are looking for motives, never neglect the simple one.

IV

Helena and I had one evening to ourselves. We made the most of it. Tomorrow we would be joined by Albia, a young girl from Britain who took care of our children while we tried to take care of her. Albia had had a poor start in life; running around after Julia and Favonia took her mind off it—in theory. She had experience of family travel from when we brought her to Italy from Londinium, but controlling a toddler and a growing infant on a two-hour jaunt in a cart would be a challenge.

“Are we sure Albia can find her way here all on her own?” I sounded wary, but not too critical.

“Settle down, Falco. My brother is bringing her.”

“Quintus?”

“No, Aulus. Quintus stays with Claudia and the baby.” Gaius Camillus Rufius Constantinus, our new nephew aged two months, was making his presence felt. The world and all the planets revolved around this baby. It could be why Helena’s other brother was very keen to leave the family home.

“Aulus is coming on his way to university. He expressed an interest in law; Papa seized the moment and Aulus is being packed off to Athens.”

“Greece! And studying? We are talking about Aelianus?” Aulus Camillus Aelianus was the unmarried son of a senator, with money in his pocket and a carefree outlook; I could not see him gravely attending jurisprudence lectures under a fig tree at an antique university. His Greek was awful for one thing. “Can’t he be a lawyer in Rome?” That would be more useful to me. Expert knowledge for which I did not have to pay was always welcome.

“Athens is the best place.” Well, it was traditionally the place to send awkward Romans who did not quite fit in.

I chuckled. “Are we certain he is going? Do you and I have to check that he goes on the boat?” At a little short of thirty, the favorite pursuits of the noble Aulus Camillus Aelianus were hunting, drinking, and gymnastics—all done to excess. There must be other, equally vigorous and disreputable habits, which I tried not to discover. That way, I could assure his parents I knew of no nasty secrets.

“This is a serious shock for my parents,” Helena rebuked me. “One of their children can at last be mentioned at respectable dinner parties.”

I held back the jokes. Their daughter had left home to live with a lowlife—me. Now that Helena and I had daughters of our own I understood just what that meant.

As parents we had better things to do than talk about Aulus. Freed for once from the threat of little visitors in the bedroom, we tested out our apartment with passion. I had hired one of the identical room-sets in a small block set around a courtyard with a well. There were balconies on the street side for show; tenants could not access them. All around us were other visiting families; we could hear

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