

LINDSEY  
DAVIS

A  
FLAVIA ALBIA  
NOVEL

ENEMIES  
*at* HOME

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ENEMIES  
*at* HOME

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Lindsey Davis



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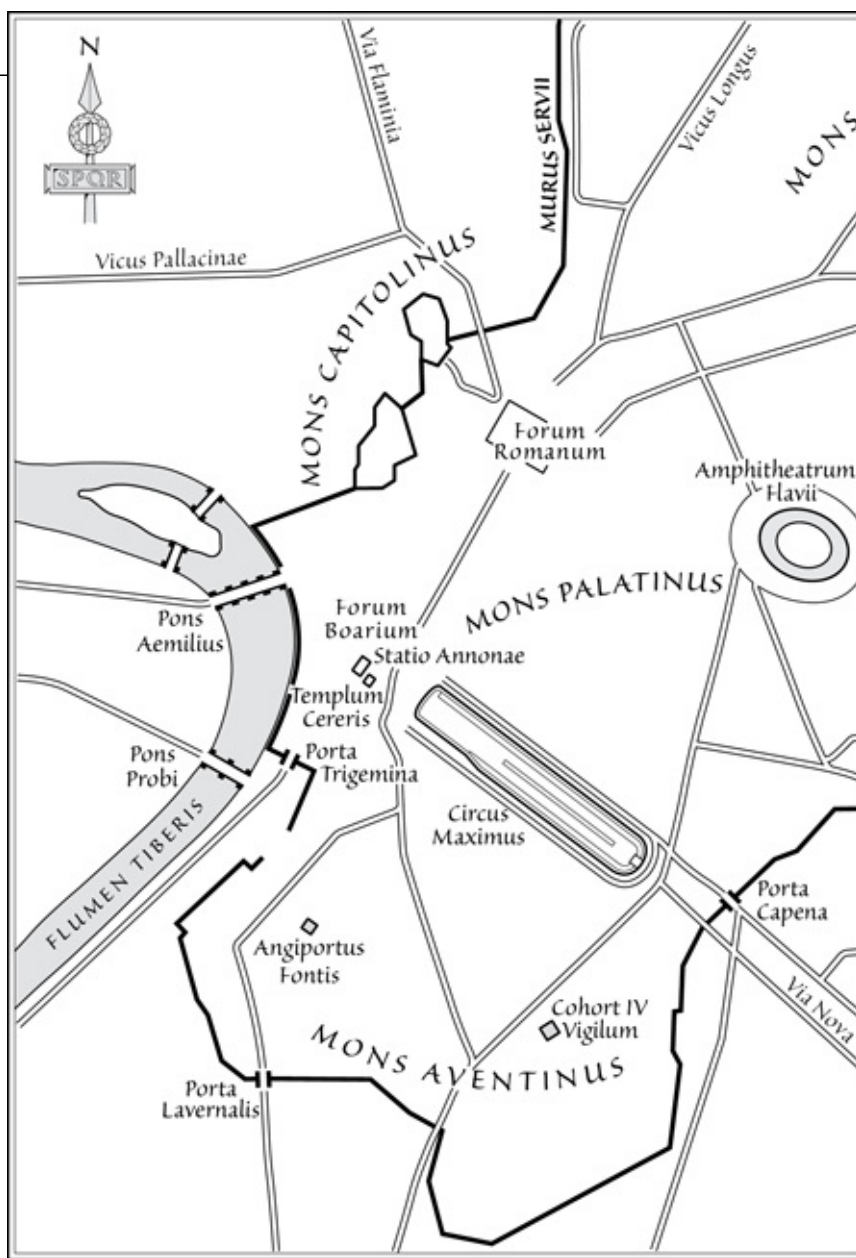
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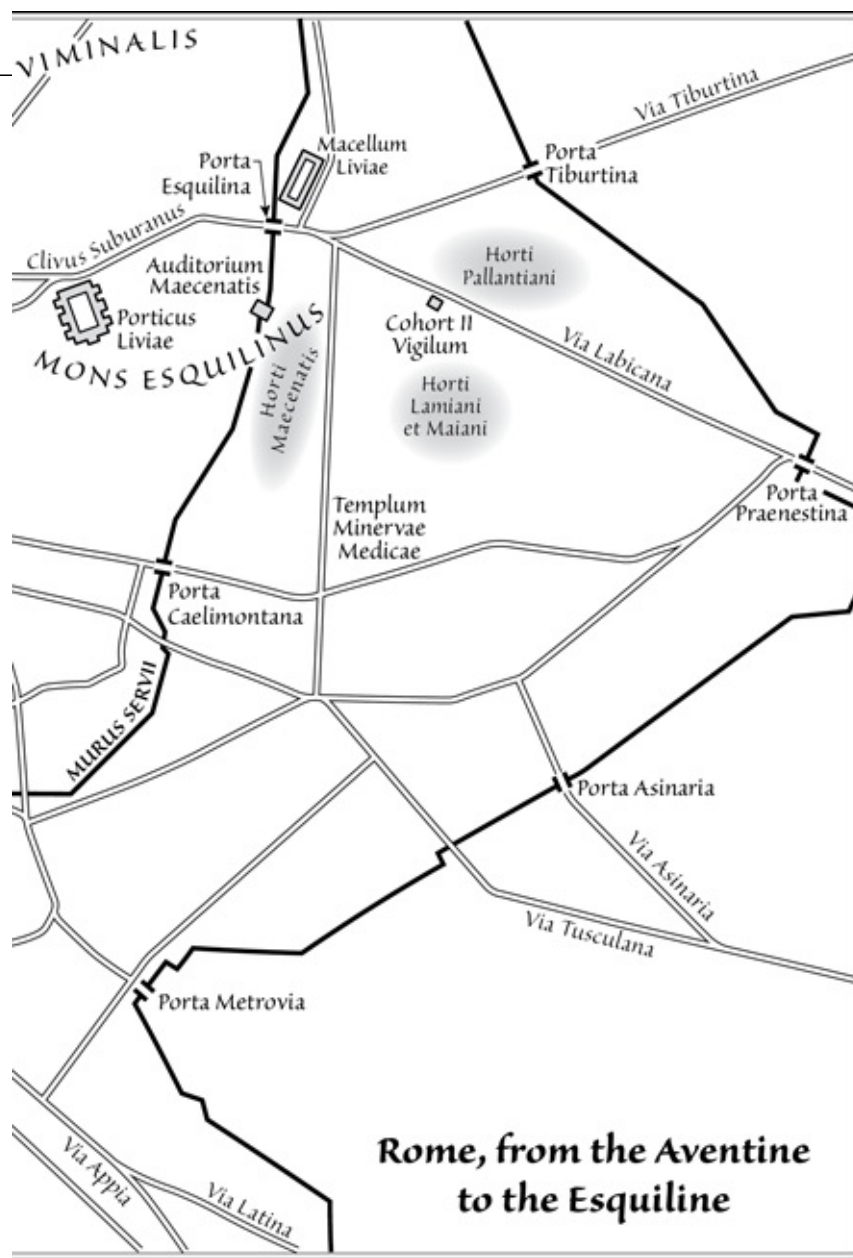
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Also by Lindsey Davis

About the Author

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# THE CAST

## FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES

Flavia Albia

escaping a holiday, on the case

Aulus Camillus Aelianus

a legal adviser, her uncle

Quintus Camillus Justinus

ditto, more raffish and popular

Claudia Rufina

still his wife, against all odds

Hosidia Meline

Aelianus' first ex, Claudia's crony

Helena Justina

a force to be reckoned with

Tiberius Manlius Faustus

a plebeian aedile, with a problem

Laia Gratiana

another ex-wife, just a problem to herself

Apollonius

a very old waiter

## THE DEAD AND THEIR ASSOCIATES

Valerius Aviola

a happy bridegroom (dead)

Mucia Lucilia

his lucky bride (dead also)

Polycarpus

their loyal freedman and steward

Graecina

his wife, a homemaker

Sextus Simplicius

Aviola's friend and executor

Hermes

Mucia's guardian and executor

Galla Simplicia

a single mother, a legacy hunter

Valerius, Valeria and Simplicia

the children she brought up single-handed

Fauna and Lusius

neighbors who saw something

Secundus and Myrinus

neighbors who heard nothing

## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Titianus

diligent investigator of the Second Cohort

Juventus

anonymous, on special duties, do not ask

Unnamed

their cohort tribune, disposition unknown

Cassius Scaurus

caring tribune of the Fourth Cohort

Fundanus

on contract for torture and burials

Old Rabirius

a shadowy capo

Young Roscius

a coming threat

Gallo fixer and trusty, do not trust him

A prisoner a dead man

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## **SLAVES, VARIOUS**

Dromo, Gratus, Libycus, Amethystus, Diomedes, Daphnus, Phaedrus, Nicostratus (not for long), Chrysodorus, Melander, Amaranta, Olympe, Myla (and a baby), Gratus, Onesimus (off the scene), Cosmus

## **PETS**

Puff a spoiled lapdog, a bad girl

Panther itching for trouble, a good boy

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ROME, the Esquiline Hill

June

AD

89

Even before I started, I knew I should say no.

There are rules for private informers accepting a new case. Never take on clients who cannot pay you. Never do favors for friends. Don't work with relatives. Think carefully about legal work. If, like me, you are a woman, keep clear of men you find attractive.

The Aviola inquiry broke every one of those rules, not least because the clients had no money, yet I took it on. Will I never learn?

\* \* \*

One warm, starry June night in the city of Rome, burglars invaded a ground-floor apartment on the Esquiline Hill. A large quantity of fine domestic silverware was taken, which people assumed was the primary target. The middle-aged couple who rented the fashionable suite had married only recently, which made what happened to them more poignant. After the robbers left, their bodies were found on the marital bed, amid signs of violent struggle. Both had been strangled.

The dead couple were wealthy enough to merit an investigation, a privilege that was generally thought too good for the poor, though it was normally available to victims who had left behind influential friends, as was the case here. Inquiries were first assigned to a *vigiles* officer, Titianus of the Second Cohort. In fairness, Titianus was no more inept than most *vigiles*. He knew that two plus two made four—unless he happened to be preoccupied with watching a good cockfight, when he might inadvertently say five. But he had a decent record of arresting pickpockets in the Market of Livia. For about two hours he even thought that trying to solve a double murder was exciting. Then reality set in.

Titianus found it impossible to identify the thief or thieves. After asking around a bit, he turned his attention to the household, declaring that this must be an inside job. Inevitably his gaze fell on the owners' freedmen and slaves. The freedmen were mature, articulate and well organized; that was how they had managed to gain their liberty and how they now bamboozled Titianus. The slaves were more vulnerable: younger and naive, or else older and plain dim. Nobody ever said any of them had threatened their master and mistress, but to a law officer in Rome any culprits were better than none, and with slaves no real proof was necessary. They could be accused, tortured, prosecuted and executed on simple probability. Titianus put on a clean tunic to look good, then went and announced to his cohort tribune that he had the answer. The slaves did it.

The slaves got wind of their plight. They knew the notorious Roman law when a head of household was murdered at home. By instinct the authorities went after the wife, but that was no use if she was dead too. So unless the dead man had another obvious enemy, his slaves fell under suspicion. Whether

guilty or not, they were put to death. All of them.

The good thing about such systematic capital punishment, occurring in public of course, was that it helped make other slaves, of whom there were hundreds of thousands in Rome, more well behaved. The proportion of masters to slaves was very small, so nobody wanted this big slave population to give the idea of staging a rebellion. In our city it had been decided not to dress slaves in any distinguishing way, because then they might realize the power of their own numbers.

Many owners lived in constant fear of slaves turning against them. You cannot batter loyalty into a sullen, captive foreigner and neither can you even guarantee that kindly treatment will gain the gratitude. In Rome, executing slaves who betrayed their masters was therefore extremely popular. At least it was among the slave-owning classes.

\* \* \*

Terrified, and with good reason, some of the accused slaves bolted from the elegant Esquiline house and took refuge a distance away at the Temple of Ceres. By tradition, this monument on the Aventine Hill offered a haven for refugees. They could claim sanctuary, be kept safe and even hope to be fed.

In theory, the authorities fostered the great temple's famous role as a focus of liberty and protection for the desperate. However, nobody wants to take fine ideals too far.

In a swift, panic-stricken meeting just after dawn, the issue of how to get rid of the fugitives was handed to a magistrate whose duties gave him close connections to the temple. His name was Manlius Faustus, one of that year's plebeian aediles, and I knew him. I liked his methods. He always stayed calm.

Charged with solving the problem, Faustus solemnly agreed with the Temple of Ceres authorities that it was important to take the correct action. This situation could easily turn ugly. They wanted to avoid censure. The public were shouting for a solution, preferably bloody. The *Daily Gazette* had already asked for a quotable comment and was about to feature the story in its scandal section. A publication would fire lurid Forum gossip. The unseen eye of the emperor was probably on the Temple. Faustus had been handed a rather hot platter here.

As this dutiful man tried to come up with ideas, he walked to a bar called the Stargazer. There, while he pondered the meager choice for breakfast, he ran into me.

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I had seen the aedile coming—always a good idea with magistrates who can impose large fines. Anyone who runs a market stall, anyone with a pavement outside their premises, anyone whose profession is heavily regulated (any prostitute, for instance), loathes aediles. Informers like me avoid them. My relatives who ran the Stargazer would not thank him for eating there, given that part of his job was the regulation of bars. They would not thank me either. They would think he had chosen because he knew it was my local.

I had first met Faustus a few weeks before, working jointly on an investigation and sometimes putting our heads together in this very caupona. I had known him to go about in disguise, though not today. He was a solid man in his mid-thirties who came down the drab street with a steady tread. He had no flashy train of attendants, relying on his purple-striped tunic to deter troublemakers. Aediles were not given bodyguards. They were sacrosanct, protected by religious laws. Besides, he was obviously tough; even when he was preoccupied, Faustus looked as if he punched his weight. That was assuming people even noticed him; he was not the kind of official who made a lot of noise wherever he went.

He cannot have expected to see me sitting at a table. He thought I was with my family at our villa on the coast, though I had recently come back to Rome because I was tired of sun, sand and fishing expeditions. Before anyone wonders, I was not hankering for Faustus. I might be a fancy-free widow, but a magistrate was way out of my league.

“Flavia Albia!”

“Manlius Faustus.”

Formal name terms. After he ordered a bread roll with Lucanian sausage, the Stargazer’s only drink that morning (or any morning), he took a seat at my table, though he asked permission first.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Always a pleasure.”

“Good to see you.”

“You too, aedile.”

Playacting. We were both unsure. The last time we met, I made embarrassing advances, which Faustus sensibly rejected. Despite my gaffe, the aedile had expressed a hope that we might work together again. Being polite, I thought. Still, here he was in my aunt’s horrible bar.

Manlius Faustus had responsibilities for neighborhood law and order—fair trading, clean streets, quiet baths and decorous brothels. I knew he was currently advising magistrates in other districts to do as they tackled a rash of random street killings that were happening throughout Rome. We lived in

troubled times. The Vesuvius calamity, a decade ago but still vivid in the memory, had shaken people. We now had a paranoid emperor, who at just short of forty was still young enough to inflict many years of dread upon us. Our empire's borders regularly came under attack from barbarians, so there was constant unsettling military talk. The city was also full of bitter satirists, outlawed philosophers and pouting poets who had failed to win prizes. In this climate all kinds of madness flourished.

As for me, I was a private investigator. Don't point out it's an unusual job for a woman; after twelve years, I had heard that enough times. I was hired by clients who wanted help when life went wrong—or sometimes before it happened: parents checking out gold diggers their silly daughters had fallen for; small traders whose rivals were stealing business; litigants searching for witnesses to back them up in court; executors of wills who feared they were inheriting large debts. Many of my inquiries led to divorce. Most clients were sad people: either hopeless idiots who had caused their own predicament or well-meaning innocents who had been targeted by fraudsters.

\* \* \*

Faustus glumly tapped his bread roll, which was definitely yesterday's. He looked around. The Stargazer stood on a corner, with the usual arrangement of crazy-patterned marble counters at right angles where, come lunchtime, big pots of unappetizing broths would attract more flies than customers. Inside, a wonky shelf had been nailed to a wall, using too-short nails. Beakers in various sizes were perched on it, ready to crash off when the fixings gave way. A faded sign on one wall offered varieties of wine, with illegible notes of their prices. Falernian was permanently listed, though always "sold out" if you asked for it. Mostly the bar was visited by local laborers in search of cheap scoff. They would stand in the street, snatching a bite and a drink. Sit-down diners were rare.

Old Apollonius, who called himself the headwaiter, leaned on one counter and stared into space. My aunt or my cousin would come in later; Aunt Junia was an abrasive character who should never have been running a bar, but her son, Junillus, made the best of this sad place.

A stray dog snuck in for a sniff around; she didn't like it and left quickly. The second table indoors was empty, which was all too normal.

Making conversation, I described to Faustus my boredom with sun and seaside stuff. He patiently listened, then told me about the double murder on the Esquiline and needing to remove the fugitive slaves from the temple. He never gave much away, but I could tell he felt despondent.

He was sturdy, in the way of plebeian Romans, though taller than many and not bandy-legged. He had that way of implying he thought himself affable, while in fact remaining reticent. His eyes were gray, which does happen; mine were too, though his had no blue tint but were entirely pale, like the mist that comes off the Tiber at dawn. His dark hair was not yet tinged with gray, though gave the impression it might be soon. When he bothered to shave and spruce up, he was a fine-looking man. He had bothered today.

Faustus speared his sausage slice on the point of his own pocket-knife, then gingerly tasted it. Even the Stargazer could do little damage to a bought-in Lucanian, so he cheered up. I reached over and pinched a gherkin that Apollonius had plonked on as a garnish. Faustus let me do it but quickly nipped up the other gherkin himself. We were easy together, for some reason that I never troubled to analyze.

He started complaining that the Esquiline, where the Aviola couple were murdered, was not h

patch. When a group of new aediles began their year in office, they divided up Rome, each hoping to get areas that produced high revenues. They couldn't take the income home (well, not legally), but public service is all about "my record is shinier than yours." Each wanted to win the fines challenge. Success would attract votes if ever they stood for election again, or at least they might be rewarded with some minor priesthood.

Faustus had managed to get jurisdiction of the Aventine, home ground for both of us and a busy hive of wrongdoers. The Esquiline was one of the other Seven Hills, lying beyond the Circus Maximus and the Forum. It was not an area I knew well and Faustus seemed to think little of it.

"I need to find out what really happened in the apartment that night, Albia. If the slaves are exonerated, they can go home. We are stuck with them until then."

"You're even stuck with them if they are guilty—they have sought asylum."

"Don't I know it! I have to prove somebody else is guilty." As Faustus leaned back in his seat and considered me, I saw where he was heading: "I don't have the time; I need an agent."

"What about the vigiles?"

Succinctly, Faustus described Titianus of the Second Cohort.

"Well, I can't help you," I warned, getting in first. "I welcome new work, but not an exhausting trek over there every day."

Faustus smiled sweetly. I was too experienced to fall for that. "I could organize some accommodation nearby," he offered. "And for assisting the Temple of Ceres, your fee would be worth having." I was tempted. I was short of work after my holiday. The temple could afford to pay well since it benefited directly from all the fines the aediles slapped on people. "Go on," he urged. "It's fascinating, Albiola. You know you want it." It always disturbed me when he used that diminutive which he had invented.

I outlined for him why no informer would do this: the impossibility of tracking down the burglar now that Titianus had muddied the trail, the difficulties of making slaves give reliable answers, the need for speed, the risks of any inquiry that was conducted in the public eye ...

"You are exactly the woman. Discreet, shrewd and no-nonsense," Faustus flattered me.

"Damn you, Tiberius." I was not being overfamiliar; he used his first name when working incognito, as he had been when I first met him.

"I am delighted you accept. Do you need a written contract?"

"I believe I do," I answered coldly. "Let me draft it; then I can specify draconian terms."

Faustus grinned as he ordered up more breakfast. He could afford to be cheerful. His troubles were over. Mine were just beginning.

At least he told Apollonius to bring Lucanian sausage for me too. "Make that with black Colymbadian olives on the side and double gherkins!" I growled, exploiting my new employer, who agreed it with a look of resignation.

To be honest, I fancied working with him. He was an interesting character.

I was already planning where to start. I told Faustus that the first thing the Temple of Ceres must pay for was decent legal advice. I happened to know two lawyers who were no more devious than normal and who, for the kind of money a religious body paid, would certainly oblige.

My uncles. Yes, I know what I said about never working with relatives, but the Camillus brother



were always so skint that they would welcome this.

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I sent a message to warn them. The aedile provided an errand boy. Even though Faustus was nominal alone, any man of affairs has an attendant who tags along then sits on the curb outside, waiting for orders. They squat there unnoticed among all the other slaves who are kicking their heels while the masters lurk in bars. At night, some streets are lined with rows of cute little boys asleep on the lanterns; in the day, pavements are clogged with liveried flunkeys, playing board games in the dust. High numbers make their owners look swanky. Faustus genuinely did not care about that, but had a laquearius with him for convenience.

Later that morning I took the aedile to meet my mother's younger brothers. They occupied a pair of houses at the Capena Gate, which sits in the old Servian Wall, just past the end of the Circus Maximus. Faustus and I walked down from the Aventine together in silence, but as we ducked under the dripping arches of the notoriously leaky Claudian Aqueduct, trying to cover our heads, I briefed him.

"They are Aulus Camillus Aelianus, senior of the two, and Quintus Camillus Justinus. We'll go to Justinus first to see Justinus then we'll probably adjourn to Aelianus' house." Faustus failed to ask why I preferred to start with Justinus. That saved me having to tell him. "Justinus is very much a family man; no one gets much quiet thinking done where he lives. His brother's house is the opposite, as dead as an old tomb in a necropolis. He is on his third wife, but the marriage is failing."

"That's sad," Faustus observed conventionally, steering me around some of the beggars who lurked under the aqueduct. "Children?"

"Fortunately no." Aelianus, an awkward character, would probably have been a high-handed father. "Both my uncles are in the Senate, although it was a big financial struggle. I don't know all the details, except that my father contributed."

"Generous."

"He had worked with both. Still does. You know how Roman families operate."

Faustus nodded. He himself lived with an uncle; they shared business interests and perhaps other sins. "The Camilli are now a partnership?"

"Yes, but on sometimes spiky terms." The pair had matured slightly when they hit their late twenties and came good as court prosecutors, which is almost a respectable career. But they were temperamentally different and Justinus had once eloped with Claudia Rufina, a Baetican heiress who had really come to Rome to marry his brother. Years later, it still rankled. The brothers were thirty-nine and forty now. Old enough to be consuls, though for them it would never happen. They lacked the right political friends. My father reckoned that was what made them decent and likeable.

“Are they good, or just your uncles?”

“They are good.” They really were. He gave me a look. “Honestly, Faustus.”

“And you work with them?”

“Sometimes a case benefits from a woman’s touch.”

Yes, and sometimes those two casual lads were just too lazy to do the legwork themselves.

\* \* \*

Camillus Justinus’ house looked half painted; I could not remember any maintenance being done since my grandparents’ time. We were admitted by an age-old Janus who had rudely forgotten my name, even though I had cursed him a hundred times before. A desultory housekeeper showed us to a saloon where a sleepy serving boy just stared at us. Faustus and I exchanged glances; we were both thinking about slaves and their habits today.

Claudia, my aunt, popped her impressive nose around a door, rattled an armory of bangles, evaluated Faustus, and disappeared. She was well groomed and jeweled up (Spanish olive oil money) but she flapped about the house with the long-suffering air of a mother of six whose husband was more loyal to her bank boxes than to her.

My uncles turned up together. They looked furtive, as if they had been gossiping about how I came to know an aedile. A slew of young children tumbled into the room with them; Justinus rounded up his offspring and shooed them out again, arms wide like a farmer penning heifers, yet he somehow projected gravitas. Aelianus looked as if he had indigestion, which was understandable in a man who had just sworn that his third marriage was absolutely the last, and who was brooding on how he would have to hand back yet another dowry. Despite having already spent it.

I performed light-hearted introductions: “Aulus Camillus Aelianus: trained in Athens and Alexandria, past son-in-law to the eminent law professor and legendary social drinker, Minas of Karystos.” Aelianus scowled, not because he was ashamed of being taught by that great Greek symposium boozier, but at my allusion to his first wife. The rest of us once viewed Hosidia Meline as an interloper, but her father had shamelessly divorced her from Aelianus in order to marry her to someone richer; insultingly, it was a mere six months after Aelianus wed her. But that was long enough for Hosidia to form a warm friendship with her fellow foreigner, Quintus’ wife, and now she was never out of their house. This deeply irritated Aelianus.

“Quintus Camillus Justinus: trained in Rome and at what he calls the University of Struggle. At least it has cheap fees.” Lovely Uncle Quintus, the better-looking younger one. Affable, talented, everyone adored him, even his put-upon wife. That was how the rascal got away with being rascally.

“Tiberius Manlius Faustus: plebeian aedile.” Faustus nodded and said nothing, though I knew he was not shy.

Just outside the doors, rioting children ended their game in ear-splitting wails as one fell over and pretended he had hurt himself. We hastily migrated to Aelianus’ house through a communicating door.

Our new location was peaceful and neat, with swept floors and up-to-date wall frescos, but it always had a cold, unscented emptiness. If I had lived there, I would have filled it with puppies, fowls, birds in the garden, and hired a lyre player. Then I would have evicted Aelianus and had an affair with

a furnace stoker.

---

Let us not discuss my tragic history with Aulus Camillus Aelianus.

\* \* \*

While Faustus outlined the Aviola murders and the slaves' flight to the temple, I scooted to the kitchen where I organized tisanes and what Father calls nicknackeroony comports. In my relative homes, the wise seek out their own refreshments. Only my mother is a thoughtful hostess. In the Aelianus ménage everything was there if you hunted for it, not just dates and miniature pastries but a perfectly willing little tray carrier. Three hauls of wedding presents had made Aelianus the owner of many matching fancy bowls. His wives tended to abandon the pottery and carry off his cash, insofar as cash existed.

He could have set up a food bowl stall, but lacked the charisma to be a successful salesman. Besides, for a senator, involving himself in retail would be breaking the rules.

I arrived back at the conference just as Faustus finished: "So my task will be identifying who really committed the murders, so the slaves can be evicted from the temple without offending the goddess. The Esquiline is not my jurisdiction, but I have been given a free hand."

"Oh, you mean *I* find the killers for you, then you sponge me out of the picture," I grumbled, asserting myself in the conversation.

Faustus replied quietly, "You know I give you credit."

My uncles observed this exchange shrewdly.

We reclined on couches as we talked. Aelianus ignored the refreshments. Justinus plowed into his brother's snacks as if he had eaten no breakfast. Of course he had. In homes full of children, breakfasts go on for most of the morning chaotically.

He mumbled through a mouthful of pastry, "We need to remember what Seneca said: 'Every slave is an enemy.' Most owners are paranoid that their staff are plotting against them."

"So often true!" Aelianus had gone to another room, returning with his muscular arms full of legal scrolls. He now found his way around the documents by means of papyrus slips that he must have inserted earlier while preparing for this meeting.

Both my layabout uncles enjoyed taking an instruction. They emphasized that until I had seen the location and interviewed those involved, all they could tell us was general law.

"Today we are just setting out the principles. I hate these cases," Justinus complained. "The traditional approach was to condemn all the slaves who were in the house. More recently, that kind of mass cull became unpopular and I would argue to have this dealt with liberally. Single out the culpable, but ignore the rest. If this couple were wealthy, are we talking about substantial numbers?"

"No." Faustus shook his head. "After their wedding, they had planned to go to a villa that Valerius Aviola owned in Campania. Almost all the household had been sent on ahead. There was some delay, I don't know what, so the couple were slumming it in Rome overnight with a skeleton staff."

The small list of suspects had been a sweetener for making me take the job. I would not have agreed if there were big squads to investigate.

Aelianus' advice was practical and focused: "Start by asking specifically who was in the bedroom. Were any attendants present when the thieves rushed in? If so, they absolutely ought to have defended

their master, regardless of risk to themselves. Identify any who failed to help, and any who did try to defend their master but were unsuccessful.”

“Not forgetting,” argued Justinus, who never entirely agreed with his brother, “those elsewhere who *might* have assisted, but who were unaware an assault was happening.” He told me to list the Aviola household and draw a plan of the apartment, plotting people’s whereabouts. Well, obviously I would do that. “Albia, check who was within earshot. Was it night? Had the whole household gone to bed? Were the newlyweds...?” He tailed off demurely.

“At it?” I suggested, looking helpful.

“Enjoying a full marriage...”

Most couples in Rome made love with half the household listening in. Often with servants right there in the room. “If they were wrestling conjugally,” I teased, “any cries for help might have been mistaken for joyous sound effects.”

Faustus shot me a prudish look, but Justinus simply carried on. “If they liked privacy and were alone together, it’s critical whether any slaves nearby could hear calls for help. You might even ask how loudly could the murdered couple shout? What about slaves who were hard of hearing and had an excuse? You see what I mean.”

Aelianus must be growing farsighted. He leaned back and squinted down his nose at a scroll as he put in his thoughts: “The law is usually interpreted as saying that any slaves in the house had a duty to come running. But does ‘in the house’ mean in other rooms or corridors, or does it include the garden or grounds, or even the street outside, if shouts and screams might reach that far? Think about that as you negotiate the apartment.”

I had a vision of conducting aural experiments. Standing in different places and yelling “Help!” while an assistant checked off results on a list ...

“You sound as if you would like to put these questions to a court.” Faustus looked nervous. He must be hoping the Temple of Ceres would not have to pay for litigation, simply to fund my crazy uncles’ professional curiosity. With slaves, the authorities had probably thought there would be no trial.

“Good advocates try to avoid lawsuits,” returned Justinus, smiling.

“Too expensive?”

“Too prone to uncertain outcomes.”

“You distrust juries?”

“Seen too many.”

\* \* \*

“You said silverware went missing. What about the burglars?” demanded Aelianus, changing tack.

“Persons of interest—serious interest, clearly,” said Faustus.

“But persons unknown? Aedile, do not involve Flavia Albia in tracing them.”

Before I could flare up, Justinus stressed the point. “My niece is special to us, Faustus. My brother and I stand *in loco parentis* when necessary.”

“Nuts!” I shrieked. “Your brother and you aren’t fit to be *in loco* to a worm!” I realized the idiot must have talked over the dangers to me before Faustus and I arrived. I had to steer them all off the

subject. No informer should allow a bunch of men to quibble about how she conducts her inquiries. “Uncle Quintus, you know perfectly well Didius Falco has nominated an old Bithynian freedman as his daughters’ guardian.” Turning to Faustus, I joked, “My father holds the traditional view that any woman without a father or husband should be placed in the care of a lecherous fraud with his filthy eyes on her money—as if my sisters and I couldn’t fritter away our property for ourselves.”

“I thought Falco chose Nothokleptes, that disaster of a banker he uses,” grinned Justinus, happily sidetracked. “That way, the cash can just be reassigned in a ledger and won’t even need to be physically moved.”

“He told me he had found a degenerate priest.” Even Aelianus played the game. “One who likes pretending he’s the Pontifex Maximus and beating naughty girls on their bottoms with rods.”

“I imagine Flavia Albia can run rings around the guardian system.” Faustus was rubbing a scar on his hand where I had stabbed him with a meat skewer once; he was subtly reminding me how I had once overreacted to something he said. There was no need to explain that to the uncles.

Aelianus returned to his original caveat. “The point is, aedile, we cannot sanction sending our dear niece among violent criminals.”

“Not an issue,” replied Faustus, stiffening up. “I admire Flavia Albia’s work, and I have witnessed her personal courage, but my intention is to use other means to follow up the burglary.”

He probably just that moment decided. Until the Camilli acted up, Manlius Faustus, the fast-thinking plebeian rich boy, had seen me as a tough, street-savvy worker he could send anywhere. He would have been right. I would have done whatever was necessary. Now, half the inquiry had been whipped away from me.

They agreed that the more tiresome task—detailed interviews with members of the Avio household—was suitable for me. I groaned at the prospect of mumbling pot scourers, shrine tidiers, and clothes attendants, but I let the men enjoy the thought that they could snooze in their studies overlooked by busts of poets, while I wasted note tablets on domestic minutiae.

In the end they would claim the credit for whatever I learned. Yes, I had been a female informer for a long time. I knew all the disadvantages.

“It should be simple,” Uncle Quintus assured me. “Remember the proverbial answer: *the carrier did it.*”

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Marry in June. May is a month of ill omen, but once it is over the goddess Juno presides kindly over couples who unite in her festival period, slathering them with good prospects, including fertility for those who can abide babies.

Camillus Justinus and Claudia Rufina had married in May, though that was in North Africa where different gods preside. I was adopted into the family after that, but relatives who pursued the eloping couple were still shocked that during their trip they had to watch another uncle of mine being killed by an arena lion. Even in my family, this counts as an unusual day out. They were all thankful for a bridegroom's bash to take their minds off the screams, despite Claudia's visible qualms about marrying Quintus. Still, weddings should be traditional and nothing beats watching a young bride riven by huge doubt. Does it?

Marcus Valerius Aviola and Mucia Lucilia were a mature couple, so presumably knew what they were doing. They can never have had much anxiety, except in their last frightful moments. Theirs was a perfectly conventional wedding, properly in June. They died on their second night together. I arrived at their apartment a week later. Their funerals had already taken place and unfortunately the apartment had been tidied. I like to inspect a crime scene with any blood or tangled bedsheets still *in situ*.

Manlius Faustus accompanied me to the Esquiline, still intent on finding accommodation for me. My idea was a room above a bar: anonymous, local, quiet by day when I wanted to review my notes, handy for eats, safely full of people at night. My headstrong employer had other ideas. He seemed to think I would drink cheap wine and pick up men. Well, those were traditional male Roman fears about women, and he hadn't known me very long. I assured him that I like to be sober when I'm man-hunting.

He then came up with a gem: I should stay in the Aviolas' guest room, at the heart of the inquiry. "Rent free to the temple? What misers! Oh Faustus. You really think it's wise for me to live where a violent murder was committed?"

"Dromo will sleep on a mat outside your door each night."

"Oh spare me that, aedile!"

Dromo was the slave Faustus took about with him. I knew Faustus' uncle normally purchased better specimens, so I guessed this loon had turned out badly and been dumped on the aedile, who seemed an oddly docile nephew.

The boy was about sixteen, podgy, sullen, and he smelt. In a city where baths were so plentiful, with many free even for slaves, Dromo must pong on purpose. He certainly didn't copy his horrible hygiene from his master. Up close, Faustus was sweet and fresh, I happened to know. "You can use

him as a messenger, Albia. Somebody has to bring me your daily action notes.”

“Who says I am sending you notes?”

“I do.”

In our one previous case together, we had both enjoyed the way the magistrate tried to play the stern monitor and I kicked against it. Now I stared him in the eye until eventually he ducked his head like a submissive dog, allowing himself a tight smile.

I told him he ought to smile more often. “It makes you look rather appetizing.” He tried to ignore that, though he came close to blushing. The man was fun to tease, although I suspected no one else ever did it. He had been unmarried for years and from the little I knew about the uncle he lived with his only visible family, Tullius was not the type.

Of course he was entitled to progress reports. It was a routine part of my service. “Daily” might be pushing it, but I was not foolish; until we apprehended the killer, I wanted somebody else to be aware of my movements. Faustus knew it would not give him supervision rights.

Or maybe he thought it did. He would soon learn.

\* \* \*

The long stroll over from the Aventine confirmed that Rome really is built on Seven Hills, and the hills are highly inconvenient. Three, the Quirinal, Viminal and Esquiline, are steep ridges that run down parallel and dominate the northern part of the city, getting in your way whenever you try moving about. Most easterly is the Esquiline, which lies mainly outside an ancient fortification, the so-called Servian Walls; the rampart overlooks an area that was once unhealthy and full of graveyards, though now some parts have been reclaimed and fancied up. People who think themselves quite grand nestle alongside workshops with unneighborly trades and the destitute.

On the city side of the old embankment lurks Nero’s Golden House, a madman’s playground that once covered the Forum and beyond. Down at the bottom of the Esquiline stands the Temple of Minerva Medica. Up at the top is the Market of Livia, named after the Empress who also built an elegant Porticus in this region, full of fountains and an enormous vine that covered all the walls. Livia’s Market is by the Esquiline Gate, where the main road that runs under the arch arrives from the once-rough district called the Subura.

On this road, the Clivus Suburanus, Faustus and I found the Aviola apartment. It took us several tries, asking where Aviola lived, so he was not well known in the district. Faustus played things unobtrusively but when I despaired of his approach, I walked into a bar and mentioned the robbery and deaths; all the gossipy waiters rushed to point out the crime scene.

It was a discreet house with several shops fronting its pavement, between which staircases led to upper levels. As was common in Rome, a substantial building had been divided internally then leased out in as many lucrative units as possible. The best suite occupied most of the ground floor, including an enclosed courtyard. This had been rented for some years by Valerius Aviola, I guessed expensively. Here he had brought his new bride after their wedding. Here they had died, before passion or economic rationale had had any chance to grow jaded.

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