

THE ROMAN MYSTERIES



CAROLINE LAWRENCE

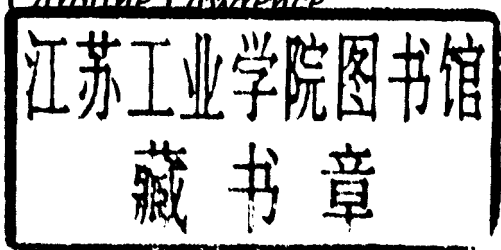
THE SECRETS
OF VESUVIUS



— A Roman Mystery —

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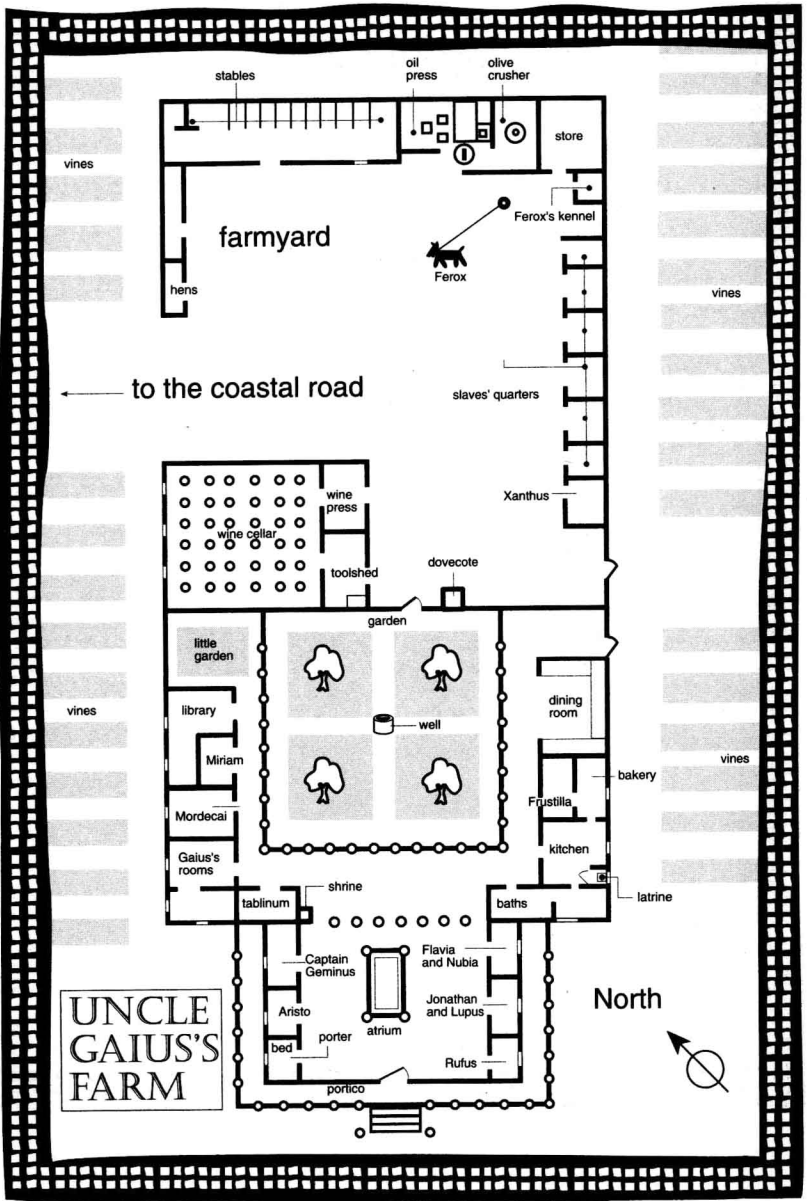
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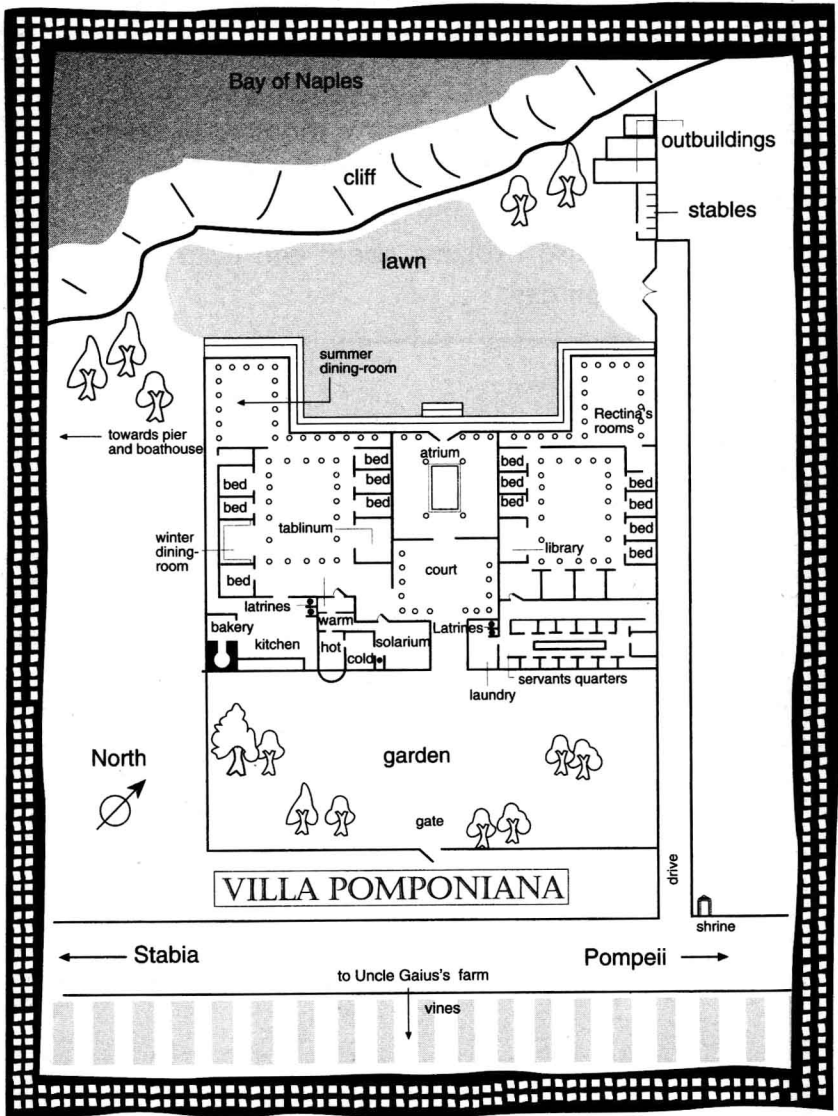
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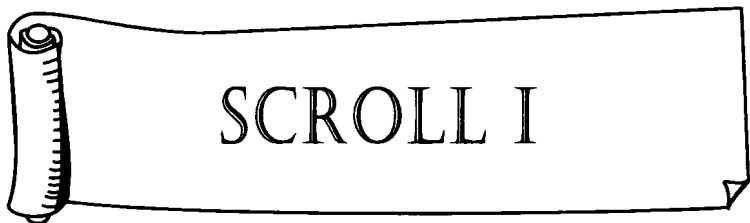
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*To all my students
past, present and future*





This story takes place in Ancient Roman times, so a few of the words may look strange. If you don't know them, 'Aristo's Scroll' at the back of the book will tell you what they mean and how to pronounce them. It also explains about the hours of the Roman day.



SCROLL I

'Jonathan, look out!' screamed Flavia Gemina.

Jonathan ben Mordecai – hip deep in the blue Tyrrhenian sea – didn't see the horrible creature rising out of the water behind him.

'Arrrgh!' The sea monster seized Jonathan round the waist.

'Aiieeee!' cried Jonathan. But his scream was cut off as he was pulled under, and salt water filled his mouth and nostrils. A moment later the surface of the water sparkled peacefully under the hot summer sun. Flavia and her slave-girl Nubia stared in horror.

Suddenly Jonathan shot up again in an explosion of spray and foam, gasping for air. He spat out a mouthful of seawater.

'Lupus, you fool, I could have drowned!'

Another figure popped up out of the water beside him, laughing hard. It was Lupus the sea monster, naked as an eel. Although Lupus was only eight years old, Flavia squealed at the sight of his nakedness and shut her eyes. She heard Lupus splash through the waves onto the beach.

When she thought it was safe to look, Flavia opened one eye.

Lupus was tying the cord belt of his tunic.

Flavia opened the other eye.

Jonathan was creeping up behind Lupus with a large scoop of wet sand in one hand. Before he could drop the sand down the back of Lupus's tunic, the younger boy spun round and tackled Jonathan. They fell onto the sand, where they rolled around like a pair of wrestlers in the palaestra.

Finally Jonathan, who was older and bigger, ended up on top. He straddled Lupus's waist and held the younger boy's wrists hard against the hot sand. Lupus struggled and strained, but although he was strong and wiry, he couldn't budge Jonathan.

'Ha!' crowed Jonathan. 'The warrior Achilles has overpowered the fierce sea monster. Beg for mercy. Go on. Say *pax!*'

Flavia sighed and rolled her eyes.

'Jonathan, you *know* Lupus can't speak. He doesn't have a tongue. How can he beg for mercy? Let him go.'

'No,' insisted Jonathan. 'No mercy until he begs for it. Do you want mercy?'

Lupus's green eyes blazed. He shook his head defiantly as he tried to struggle free.

'Then you will receive the punishment!' Jonathan let a glob of foamy saliva emerge from his mouth. It hung over Lupus's face.

Lupus looked up in alarm at the dangling spit. Flavia and Nubia squealed. Suddenly a furry wet creature hurled itself at Jonathan, barking enthusiastically.

'Scuto!' laughed Jonathan. He fell off Lupus as the dog covered his face with hot kisses. Two wet puppies scrambled after the bigger dog.

Scuto waited until the four friends had gathered around him. Then he shook himself vigorously. The puppies followed suit, shaking their small bodies from head to tail.

'*En!*' said Nubia. 'Behold! My new tunic is bespattered.'

Jonathan laughed. 'I think we've been reading you too much Latin poetry.'

Flavia looked down at her own tunic, which was also spotted with salt water. 'Oh well, only one thing to do . . .'

She ran squealing into the water, tunic and all. The other three yelled and followed her.

For several minutes they splashed and dunked each other. Then Lupus gave the older children their daily swimming lesson. He showed them how to move through the water by pulling with their arms and making their legs move like a frog's. Nubia, who had grown up in the African desert, where water was rare and precious, had been shy of the sea at first. Now she loved swimming. Jonathan was making good progress, too. But Flavia couldn't get her arms and legs to work together.

At last they all emerged from the sea and fell in a row onto the soft, warm dunes. Breathing hard, the four of them closed their eyes and let the hot August sun dry them. The sea breeze was deliciously cool against their wet bodies. Scuto and the puppies, Nipur and Tigris, lay panting on the sand.

When she'd caught her breath, Flavia lifted herself on one elbow and squinted up the beach. Sextus, one of her father's sailors, lay dozing under a papyrus parasol meant for the two girls.

Having their own private bodyguard was more than a luxury. Only a few weeks earlier, Flavia and her friends had narrowly escaped capture by Venalicius the slave-dealer. If he had caught them, he could have taken them anywhere in the Mediterranean and sold them as slaves, never to be found again. But Sextus was nearby, and for the moment they were safe.

Flavia lay back on the warm sand and gazed up at a seagull drifting in the pure blue expanse of the sky. She could taste the salt on her lips and hear the whisper of waves on the wet sand. Her friends lay beside her and the dogs dozed at her feet.

Flavia Gemina closed her eyes and sighed. She wished every day could be like this. But her father had decided that Ostia was not a safe place for them to spend the rest of the summer. In two days they would sail south to her uncle's farm near Pompeii.

That was a pity. The farm was safe. But dull.

Flavia sighed again.

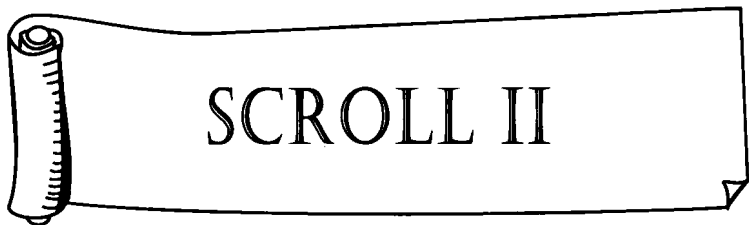
She had enjoyed her first taste of detective work, when she and her friends had discovered and trapped Ostia's dog-killer. She wanted more mysteries to solve. And there were plenty here in Ostia. A nine-year-old girl named Sapphira had gone missing a few months earlier. Alma's favourite baker had been robbed three times. And there were always mysterious strangers lurking near the harbour, hoping to catch a fast boat away from Italy. Living in a busy seaport like Ostia, you needed to use all your senses and be constantly on the alert.

'What is it, Jonathan?' said Flavia. 'Why do you keep poking me?'

'You were snoring,' he said. 'And I think someone's in trouble.'

Flavia sat up and shaded her eyes with her hand.

Far out on the vast expanse of glittering blue water, she could just make out the curve of an upturned rowing boat. And clinging to it was a tiny figure frantically waving for help!



SCROLL II

The four friends scrambled to their feet and gazed out to sea.

'Behold. A sturdy vessel has capsized!' said Nubia.

'Sextus!' cried Flavia. 'Quick!'

The big bodyguard scrambled to his feet and looked around in alarm.

'A boat's capsized!' she yelled.

The three dogs barked and bounced round the sailor as he ran up to them. He was tanned and muscular, and would have been good-looking if most of his teeth hadn't been missing.

'What?' he said, and then, 'Where?'

They all pointed.

It took Sextus only a moment to assess the situation. Cursing under his breath, he stripped off his tunic, ran splashing through the shallow water and then swam towards the upturned boat with strong, powerful strokes.

Lupus ran to the water's edge, hesitated, then took off his own tunic.

'Lupus, no! It's too far,' they cried.

Lupus ignored their shouts. He plunged into the water and began to swim after Sextus.

To Flavia, it seemed ages before Sextus reached the upturned boat. She breathed a sigh of relief as Lupus's smaller head finally joined the other two. But instead of swimming back at once, the three figures stayed with the boat, bobbing up and down.

'What are they doing?' said Jonathan.

Finally the two larger heads began moving back towards the beach. After a moment the smaller head followed, but more slowly than before.

Nubia gripped Flavia's arm anxiously. 'Lupus getting tired.'

'You're right,' said Flavia. 'He'll be exhausted.'

'I have an idea,' said Jonathan. 'I'll run to the marina and hire a litter to carry them home. Father can treat them.'

'Good idea,' said Flavia. 'But what about your asthma? I'd better go. I can run faster.' When she saw the expression on his face she gave his shoulder a quick squeeze. 'You stay and protect Nubia. Scuto will protect me.'

Flavia's bare feet slapped against the wet sand – she had left her sandals on the dunes. Never mind, no time to go back now. Scuto ran beside her, his tongue lolling. Soon she could see the marina where fishing boats and smaller merchant ships were docked.

Her heart was beating fast as she and Scuto ran over

the softer dunes, past the synagogue and up towards the quay. A boardwalk separated the marina on the left from warehouses and temples on the right. As Flavia ran past the piers she looked to see if the slave-ship *Vespa* was moored there. Thankfully, its hateful yellow and black sail was nowhere in sight. Venalicius and his crew must be on their way to Delos, or one of the other slave-trading centres.

The area around the Marina Gate was crowded. Flavia hooked her finger through Scuto's collar as she dodged sailors, shoppers, soldiers and slaves. She needed a litter, and she needed one quickly. There were usually one or two under the arch of the gate. They offered lifts around Ostia for a few sestericii.

She kept her left hand tightly over her money pouch. In this crush, thieves would be everywhere.

At last she spotted a litter in a patch of shade near the Marina Gate. Beside it lounged two muscular young men eating their lunch: greasy pieces of meat on wooden skewers.

'How much . . . to hire your litter . . . for half an hour?' She stood breathlessly in front of them.

'What, darling? Want a ride, do you?' grinned one of the litter-bearers. His ears were shaped like broccoli.

'Capsized boat,' Flavia gasped. 'My friends are rescuing him. How much to carry him . . . to a house near the Laurentum Gate?' She jingled her coin purse urgently.

‘Four sestercii, sweetheart,’ said the other one, whose nose was not unlike a turnip. ‘I’m giving you a special rate because it’s a good deed we’re doing.’

‘And because it’s been slow all morning,’ grumbled Broccoli-ears under his breath, and tossed the last greasy gob of meat to Scuto.

Flavia and her hired litter-bearers were about a hundred yards up the beach when she saw Sextus stagger out of the water and onto the shore, half pulling and half carrying a portly man.

Barking loudly, Scuto raced ahead towards the group on the shore. As the dog approached, the stout man abruptly sat down on the sand. Scuto, his tail wagging vigorously, licked the man’s face and then hurried on to greet the others.

‘You’re just in time,’ cried Jonathan, running to meet Flavia and the litter. ‘His lips are turning blue. We need to wrap him in a blanket and get him to my father as quickly as possible.’

Broccoli-ears and Turnip-nose knew their job. They lifted the man and helped him into the litter. He was stout and tanned, with a fringe of white hair round his bald head. And he was wheezing, the way Jonathan sometimes did. As Flavia helped the litter-bearers tuck a faded green blanket around him, she noticed a heavy gold ring on his finger.

‘Do you want the curtains open or shut, darling?’ asked Turnip-nose.

‘Open,’ said Flavia. ‘So we can see how he’s doing.’

‘Wait,’ gasped the man. It was the first time he had spoken. ‘Where is my bag?’ His voice was high and breathy.

‘He insisted we take it,’ explained Sextus, coming up to the litter. ‘Lupus has it.’

Flavia turned to see Nubia helping Lupus out of the sea. The boy staggered across the sand to the litter and held out a dripping oilcloth bag. The man, now comfortably propped up on his cushions, grasped it eagerly.

‘Thank you, thank you,’ he cried in his light voice. ‘This is all that matters.’ He reached into the bag and they all waited to see what priceless treasure he would pull out of it.

It was a wax tablet and stylus. The man grunted with satisfaction, opened the tablet and shook drops of water from it. Then he began to write. They all stared at him. After a moment he looked back at them.

‘Well, why are we waiting?’ he wheezed cheerfully. ‘Off you go, bearers, to wherever you are taking me.’

‘Wait!’ cried Flavia. ‘I know who you are!’