

THE ROMAN MYSTERIES



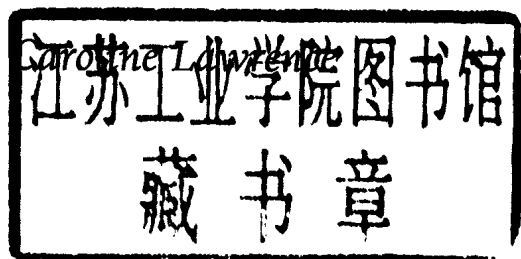
CAROLINE LAWRENCE

THE DOLPHINS OF LAURENTUM



—— A Roman Mystery ——

THE DOLPHINS OF LAURENTUM



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THE DOLPHINS
OF LAURENTUM

THE ROMAN MYSTERIES

by Caroline Lawrence

The Thieves of Ostia
The Secrets of Vesuvius
The Pirates of Pompeii
The Assassins of Rome

*To Jan-Theo, Bill, Barbara,
Eric, Silvano, Domenico
and all my other cyber-buddies
from the Ostia website*

ITALY IN AD 79

(after the eruption of Vesuvius)

N

Rome

Ostia

River Tiber

Laurentum

Neapolis

Misenum

Surrentum

Herculaneum

Pompeii

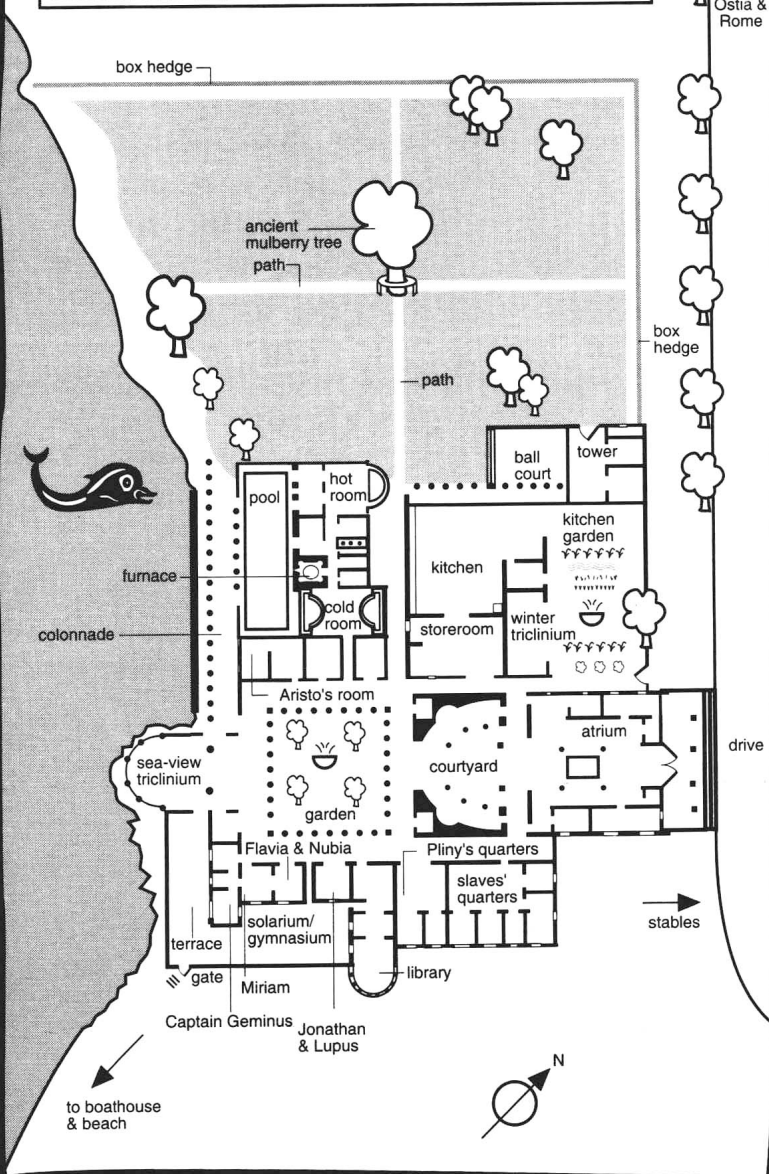
Stabia

Towns destroyed in the
eruption of Vesuvius
are shown in grey

Sicily



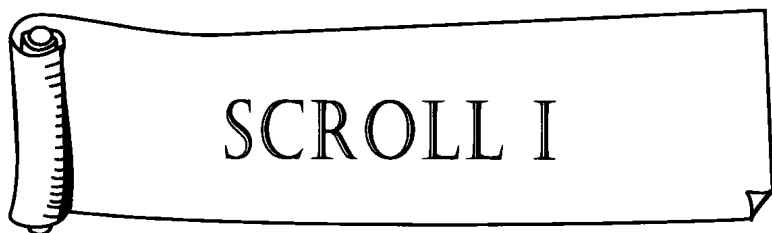
PLINY'S LAURENTUM VILLA AD 79



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.

This story contains descriptions of 'free diving', a very dangerous activity which involves holding your breath underwater for as long as possible. Don't try this at home.



Lupus was drumming.

He sat on the wooden floor of the small bedroom and played his goatskin drum: one beat with his right hand, another with his left. His eyes were closed but in his head he clearly saw the pattern he was making. The hits were small black pebbles, the no-hits were white pebbles. He played the pattern, built up the white and black pebbles and then entwined them in a plait. Just like the black and white mosaic chips in the floor of the triclinium downstairs.

When he wove drum patterns, it drove everything else from his mind. And that was good. The mosaic rhythm lifted him up and carried him along. He was only aware of the ache in his forearms and the tingling in the tips of his fingers and the pattern unwinding in his head.

‘Lupus!’

The voice had been calling him for some time now. He opened his eyes.

Jonathan was sitting on his low bed, tuning a Syrian barbiton.

‘Enough warm-up,’ said his friend with a grin. ‘Let’s play.’

Lupus nodded and looked at Jonathan hard. Sometimes, when he’d been drumming, it was as if he’d been dreaming. And when he stopped it was like coming out of a trance: everything looked strange.

His friend Jonathan looked strange.

Maybe it was because Jonathan’s hair, once thick and curly, was now shorn to a soft dark stubble. Maybe it was because he’d lost weight, and his dark eyes looked huge in his face. Maybe it was because the brand on his left shoulder was still red and swollen.

Jonathan ben Mordecai had recently turned eleven. He seemed older than his age. Lupus felt older than his own eight and a half years, too. He hadn’t felt like a child since his tongue had been cut out.

Lupus watched Jonathan settle the smooth wooden bulb of the instrument between his bare feet and support the long neck with his hands, one over, one under.

He heard the deep note as Jonathan began to thumb the fattest string. The sound was sweet and round. It needed a drumbeat that sounded not like pebbles, but like something softer, rounder, more muted.

Lupus picked up the new drumstick he’d found at Flavia’s.

He gave the drum an experimental tap and nodded

in satisfaction at the sound. Perfect. He found the beat and started to weave a new pattern, holding the drumstick in his right hand and using the palm of his left.

‘Lupus!’ Jonathan was staring at him in horror.

Lupus stopped drumming and gave Jonathan his bug-eyed look: What?

‘What on earth are you using as a drumstick?’

Lupus held up the sponge-stick and shrugged, as if to say: It’s a sponge-stick.

‘Where did you get it?’

Lupus tilted his head towards Flavia’s house next door.

‘Lupus. Do you know what that is? I mean, what it’s used for?’

Lupus shook his head.

Jonathan sighed. ‘I know you used to be a half-wild beggar-boy,’ he said. ‘But you’ve been living with us for nearly four months now. You’re practically a civilised Roman. You’re sure you don’t know what that sponge-stick is used for?’

Lupus shook his head again. And frowned.

Jonathan leaned forward and grinned. ‘It’s for wiping your bottom after you’ve been to the latrine.’

‘Flavia!’ bellowed a voice from the latrine. ‘Where’s the sponge-stick?’

Flavia Gemina looked at her ex-slave-girl Nubia.

They shrugged at one another, got up and went out of their bedroom onto the balcony.

‘I don’t know, Uncle Gaius!’ Flavia yelled down into the sunny courtyard garden. ‘Isn’t it there? In the beaker of vinegar?’

‘No!’ came a grumpy voice from the latrine.

Flavia leaned further over the polished rail and called out, ‘Do you want me to grab you some leaves from the fig tree?’

‘I’ll do it!’ said Alma the cook, coming into view. She peered up at the two girls suspiciously.

‘You two aren’t wearing eyeliner, are you?’

‘Um, no!’ Flavia hastily pulled Nubia back into their room. Not only were they wearing kohl around their eyes, but they had done up their hair and put on all the jewellery they owned. They were trying on their outfits for Miriam’s betrothal supper, although the date had still not been set.

Nubia was wearing a peach shift over a lemon-yellow tunic. ‘Flavia . . .’ she said slowly, as she brushed her finger against the wine dregs at the bottom of an empty wine-cup, ‘what is betrothal supper?’

Flavia was smoothing her own grey silk shift over the sky-blue tunic and admiring the combination. ‘Well, it’s usually when the parents arrange the marriage of a man and a girl. There’s a celebration banquet and the man holds the girl’s hand in front of

everybody and then he gives her a ring. After that they set the date for the wedding. Alma told me the wedding might be a week later, or a month later or even ten years later, if the couple are very young when they're betrothed. Sometimes the girl is younger than we are.'

Flavia sat beside a small oak table on a folding stool. Nubia sat on a similar stool, facing her former mistress.

'Do you think Miriam and Gaius will wait a year or two later?' Nubia leaned forward and brushed her finger lightly over Flavia's cheekbone.

'I don't think so. First, because of the volcano. Aristo says it reminded everyone that they won't live forever. And second, because they're passionately in love. Alma says it's a bad omen.'

'The volcano?'

'No, that they're in love. She says marrying for love is always a bad idea.' Flavia peered into her highly polished silver mirror. 'No. That's too dark. Brush a bit off.'

Nubia thumbed the wine dregs off Flavia's cheek, leaving just the hint of a blush.

'That's better,' said Flavia, and stroked some of the powdered wine onto Nubia's cheekbone. Then she leaned back on her stool and narrowed her eyes.

'No. Your skin's too dark. It doesn't show up,' said Flavia. She sat forward again. 'Where you grew up, do

the parents choose your husband or do you?' she asked.

Nubia covered her smile with her hand. 'We choose, and our parents say yes or no.'

'Now do my mouth,' said Flavia, pushing her lips out.

'Oh, very nice!' came a voice from underneath Flavia's low bed.

'Jonathan!' Flavia squealed and the silver mirror clattered to the floor. 'How long have you been under there?'

Jonathan wriggled out from underneath the bed and grinned up at her. His nutmeg-coloured tunic was grey with fluff and there was brick dust in the stubble of his cropped hair.

'You need to remind Alma to dust under the beds,' he remarked, standing up and brushing off the dust balls.

'Stop!' cried Flavia. 'You'll get our clothes dirty!'

Jonathan ignored Flavia. 'Come on, Lupus,' he said. 'You can come out now.'

'Lupus is under there, too?' Flavia and Nubia exchanged horrified glances. Flavia stood up and folded her arms. Have you two been spying on us? We finished lessons over an hour ago. How long have you been under there?' she repeated.

'Not long.' Jonathan helped Lupus to his feet. Lupus grinned at them. He was wearing his favourite

sea-green tunic and had slicked his dark hair back from his forehead with laurel-scented oil. Because Lupus couldn't speak, he always carried a wax tablet with him. Now he opened this tablet with a flourish and thrust it in the girls' faces:

SURPRISE!

With his other hand he held out the sponge-stick.

'Where did you find that?' cried Flavia. 'And how did you —?'

'Shhh!' said Jonathan. 'We don't want anyone else to know about our secret entrance.'

'You mean you came in through the wall?' Flavia's grey eyes widened.

Jonathan nodded. 'My bedroom is right next to yours. Whenever I can't sleep I pick at the plaster. I haven't been sleeping very well since we got back from Rome and I've picked off quite a bit of it. Lupus and I spent all day yesterday getting the mortar out from between the bricks and we've made a way through.'

'Jonathan! How exciting! Let's not tell anybody else,' Flavia breathed. 'Not even your father or Miriam.'

'That's why I've been telling you to be quiet.' Jonathan rolled his eyes.

Flavia sucked a loose strand of her light brown hair

thoughtfully. 'We'll have to think of a secret signal for when we want to come through. How about three taps on the wall?'

Jonathan shook his head. 'Everybody knocks three times,' he said. 'How about four? One for each of us.'

'Excellent idea,' said Flavia.

Lupus gave them a thumbs-up.

At that moment they all heard four distinct raps at the front door of the house. The friends looked at each other, wide-eyed.

'You two stay here. Out of sight!' hissed Flavia. She and Nubia rushed back to the balcony and peered down into the garden.

Flavia's uncle Gaius was standing by the fountain, washing his hands. As he shook the drops from his fingers and turned towards the entrance of the house, Caudex the door-slave staggered into the garden, half-carrying and half-supporting a beggar.

The man wore a tattered tunic and had bandages instead of sandals on his feet. His legs were covered with red sores. His hair was matted and his beard ragged. The beggar was tall, but painfully thin. From her vantage point on the balcony above, Flavia couldn't make out his expression, but it looked as though he was drunk.

'Caudex,' she scolded, starting down the stairs, 'what on earth are you doing? You can't just let any -'
Alma screamed.