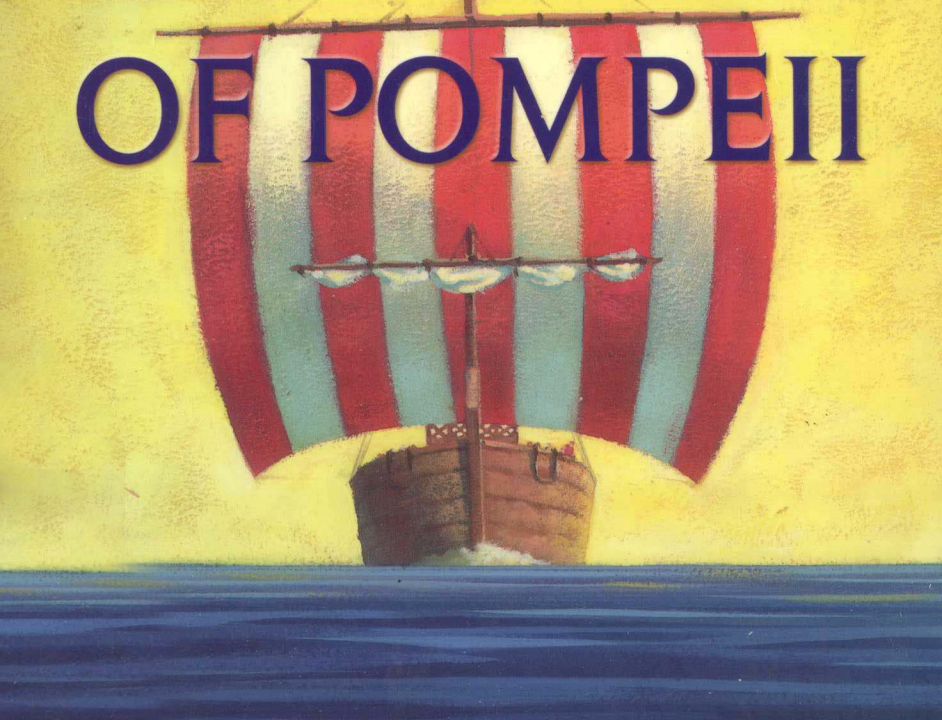


THE ROMAN MYSTERIES



CAROLINE LAWRENCE

# THE PIRATES OF POMPEII



—— A Roman Mystery ——

# THE PIRATES OF POMPEII



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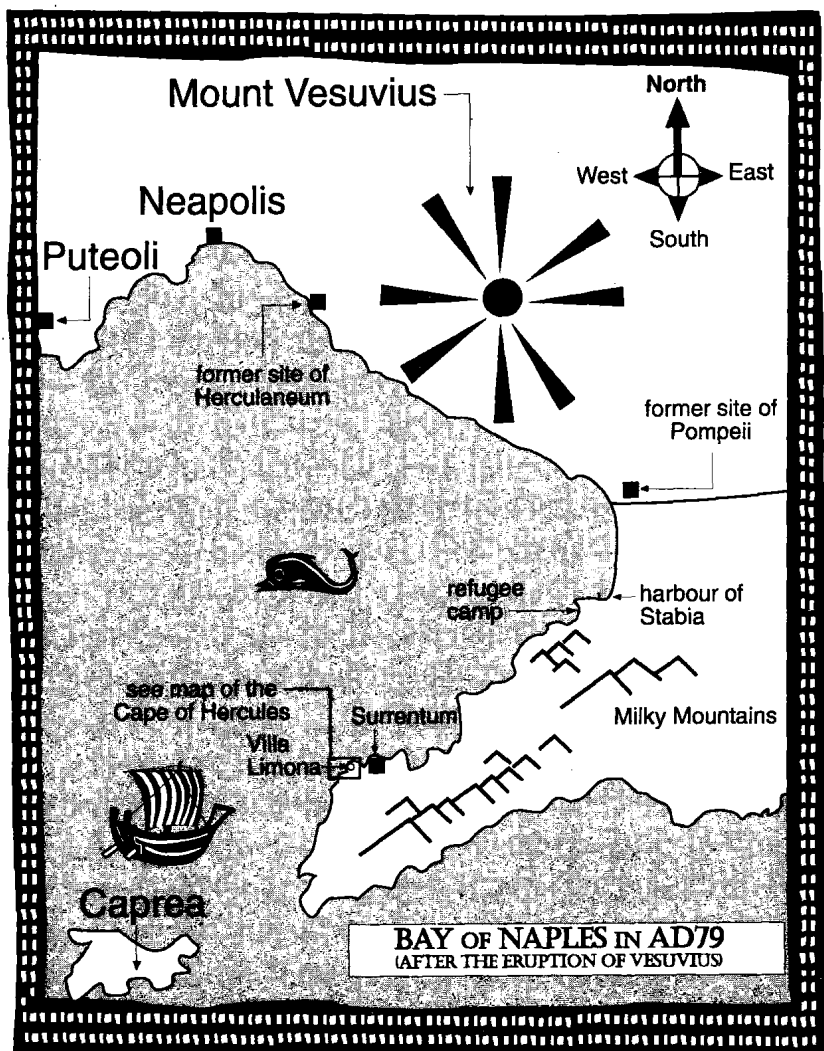
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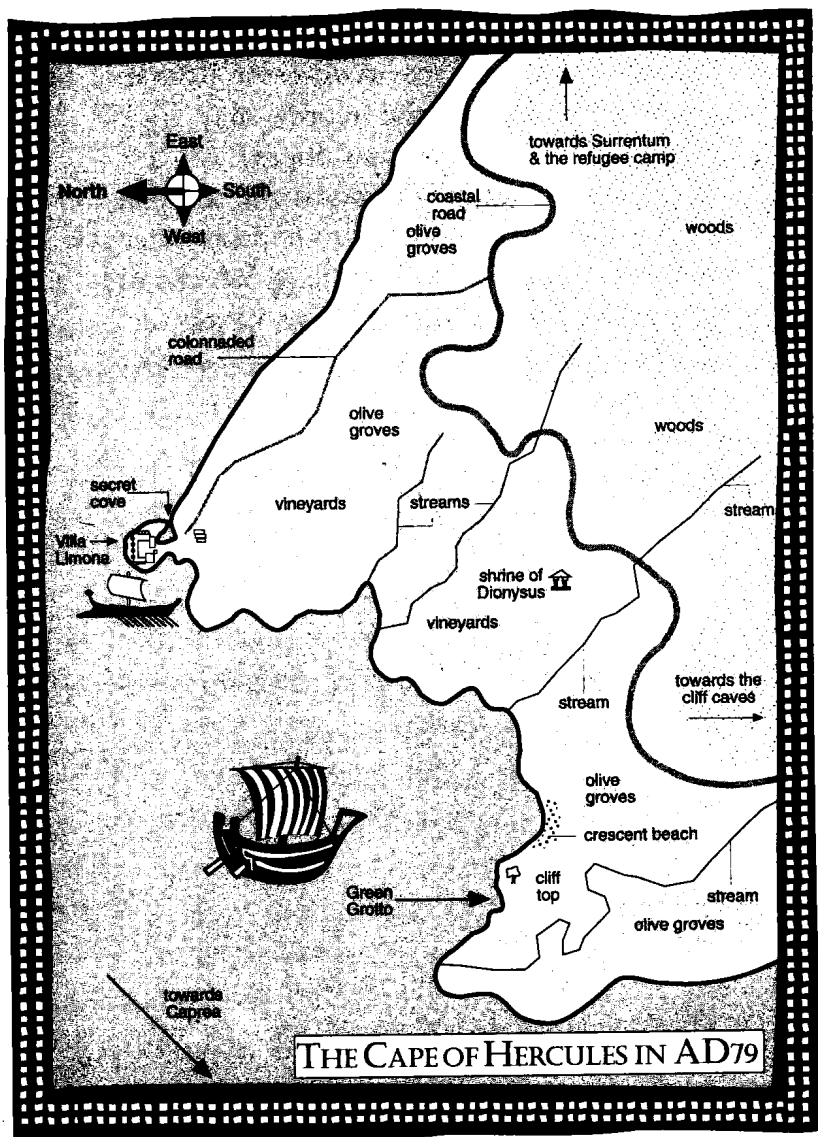
# THE ROMAN MYSTERIES

*by Caroline Lawrence*

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*To my husband Richard,  
who feeds me*







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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 will also tell you a bit about patrons and clients in the Roman Empire.

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# SCROLL I

The mountain had exploded and for three days darkness covered the land. When the sun returned at last, it was not the same golden sun which had shone down on the Roman Empire a week before. It was a counterfeit, gleaming dully in a colourless sky above a blasted world.

On a grey hillside ten miles south of the volcano, a dark-skinned slave-girl climbed a path in search of the flower which might save her dying friend.

Nubia turned her head left and right, scanning the ash-coated slope for a gleam of pink blossom. She did not know what Neapolitan cyclamen looked like, only that it was pink and had a remarkable ability to cure. The doctor had called it 'amulet'.

But there was no pink here. Only grey. Nubia climbed slowly past olive trees, figs, cherry, quince and mulberry, all covered with the same soft crust of chalky ash. Here and there, black stumps showed where falling drops of fire had set an olive or palm tree alight. Some of the charred tree trunks were still smoking. It looked like the land of the dead, thought Nubia: the Land of Grey.

The blanket of ash muffled sound, but Nubia heard a cry drifting up from the beach below. She stopped, turned, and looked back down. From this distance, the buildings around the cove seemed tiny.

Through the thin film of ash which still drizzled from the sky, she could make out the Inn of Pegasus on the right of the cove, by the headland. A few fishing boats, as tiny as toys, were drawn up on the beach near the boathouses where Nubia and the others had taken shelter from the eruption.

On the other side of the cove were the Baths of Minerva, the red roof-tiles pale pink under a coating of ash. Between the baths and the boathouses were hundreds of tents and makeshift shelters. The refugee camp.

Another wail rose from the beach below and Nubia heard an anxious voice behind her.

‘Who’s dead? It’s not him, is it?’

Nubia turned to look at the girl with light brown hair who was hurrying back down the slope. Behind her, three dogs sent up clouds of ash as they pushed through the oleanders and myrtles on either side of the path.

‘I don’t think it is him,’ said Nubia, turning back to gaze down on the beach.

‘Doctor Mordecai said he wouldn’t live much longer . . .’

The girls watched a coil of black smoke rise from the funeral pyre on the shore. Around it, tiny figures lifted their hands to the hot white sky and cried out to

the gods. Nubia shuddered and reached for her mistress's hand.

Flavia Gemina was more a friend than a mistress. A freeborn Roman girl, she had bought Nubia in the slave-market of Ostia to save her from an unimaginable fate. Since then, Flavia's kindness had been like a drink of cool water in a desert of pain. Even now, Nubia took courage from Flavia's steady gaze and the reassuring squeeze of her hand.

After a moment they turned wordlessly and continued up the grey mountain, a dark-skinned girl and a fair-skinned one, wearing torn and dirty tunics, searching among the ashes for the plant which might save their dying friend Jonathan.

From the beach below, eight-year-old Lupus saw the girls start back up the path. They were easy to see: the only spots of colour on the grey mountain. Flavia wore a blue tunic and Nubia a mustard-yellow one. The golden-brown dot pursued by two tiny black dots must be Scuto and the puppies.

He was just turning back to the pyre, to watch the body burn, when he thought he saw something move much higher up the mountain. A person wearing brown. No. Two people.

Then a gust of wind blew acrid smoke from the funeral pyre into his face. His eyes watered and blurred. When he'd wiped them, he could still see the girls and their dogs, but the other figures had disappeared.

Lupus shrugged and turned back to the burning body.

The dead man's relatives were crying and moaning. Two professional mourners dressed in black helped the family express their grief with shrill wails. Lupus let their cries of pain wash over him. He didn't know who the dead man was. He didn't care. He only knew that the man's bloated corpse had washed up on the shore around noon. One of many in the past two days.

Lupus stood close enough for the heat of the flames to scorch him and he kept his eyes open, though the smoke stung. When the professional mourners scratched their cheeks, he scratched his. It hurt, but it brought release. He needed to feel the pain.

The heat of the flames seemed to make the blackened corpse shiver and for a moment Lupus imagined it was the body of Pliny, the great admiral who had treated him with courtesy and respect, but who had died gasping like a fish.

Then the body became that of Clio, seven years old, bright, brave and cheerful. Clio whom he had tried twice to save. And failed.

Finally he saw the body of his own dead father. The father whose murder he had witnessed, powerless to stop. The father whom he had never properly mourned. Lupus tore at his cheeks again, and let the pain rise up in him. Around him the mourners wailed. At last he, too, opened his tongueless mouth and howled with anger and grief and despair.

★

Flavia's keen grey eyes were usually excellent at spotting wild flowers.

In Ostia, whenever Flavia went to visit her mother's grave outside the city walls, she and her nurse Alma would gather herbs and wild flowers along the way. Flavia always left the prettiest ones at the tomb, to comfort the spirits of her mother and baby brothers. Later Alma would divide the remaining herbs into two groups. She used some for cooking and put the rest into her medicine box.

When Doctor Mordecai had asked the girls to find amulet, Flavia had been confident of success. But now she found it hard to recognise the wild flowers beneath their covering of grey ash. By mid-afternoon, she and Nubia had found others which might be of use to the doctor: red valerian, dove-weed and blood-blossom.

But no amulet.

So they continued up the mountain, climbing higher and higher. As they ascended, the olive trees gave way to chestnut, beech and pine woods. The air grew cooler.

When they reached the summit, they stopped to catch their breath. Flavia uncorked her water gourd and took a long drink. Then she handed it to Nubia.

When Nubia had finished drinking she wiped her mouth. It left a dark streak across her ash-powdered face.

'You look like a spirit of the dead,' said Flavia.

'Don't say such a thing!' Nubia looked horrified and

made the sign against evil. She poured some water into the palms of her hands and rubbed her face. 'Better?' she asked.

Flavia nodded. Up here on the summit the ash was so thick that the puppies were up to their noses in it and had begun to sneeze. Flavia lifted Jonathan's puppy Tigris and absently ruffled the top of his head as she looked around.

Ahead of them, across a level clearing among the pines, was a low wooden fence, made of rough-cut logs. Scuto bounded towards it, sending up puffs of grey ash mixed with pumice. Suddenly he stopped, looked back at Flavia and whined.

The girls reached the rail at the same time. On the other side of it, the mountain fell away in a precipitous drop which made Flavia's stomach contract.

But it was the sight beyond that made her gasp.

From where they stood on the pine-covered ridge, Flavia and Nubia could see the great curving Bay of Neapolis on the left, the water scummy grey under an iron sky. Straight ahead, on the horizon, stood a terrible sight.

Vesuvius.

Its top half had been utterly blown away, leaving an ugly crater where the summit had once been. The edge of this crater glowed red, like a bloody, ragged wound. A plume of black smoke rose into the colourless sky and blurred away towards the south west.

Below the smouldering volcano, a thousand fires burned across the chalky landscape, as if a vast

besieging army was encamped at its foot. The smoke from the fires had created a dark, transparent cloud which hung over the plain.

Flavia squinted and tried to find the landmarks she knew must be there: the port of Stabia, her uncle's farm, the town of Pompeii. Finally she found Stabia's harbour almost directly below them. She could make out the curved breakwater and straight piers, and a few minuscule boats.

'Behold,' said Nubia. 'Villa of Clio.'

'Where?' asked Flavia, putting down Tigris and shading her eyes. When the volcano had erupted they had hurried to the Villa Pomponiana, the seaside house of their friend Clio. They had hoped to sail away but had ended up escaping on foot.

'I don't see Clio's villa. Or Uncle Gaius's farm.' Flavia frowned. 'Where is the farm? It should be . . .'

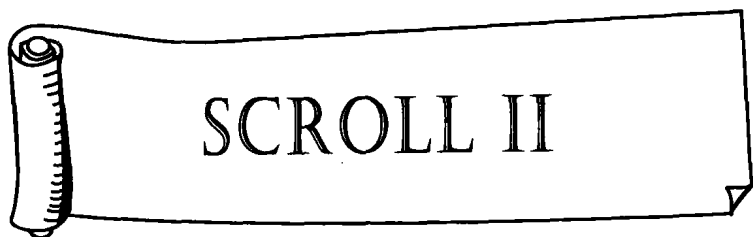
'There,' said Nubia, pointing. 'Mound with smoke ascending heavenward.'

Suddenly Flavia saw it all.

Her knees went weak. She gripped the wooden rail at the cliff's edge and held on until her knuckles were white. For a horrible moment she thought she was going to be sick.

'It's gone,' she whispered. 'All of it. Clio's house, Uncle Gaius's farm and . . . the entire town of Pompeii. It's all been buried by the volcano!'





## SCROLL II

The girls were halfway down the mountain when Scuto found something. The sun was sinking towards the sea and they needed to get back to the camp before it set, but his steady, urgent barking demanded their attention.

Presently the puppies joined in, echoing Scuto's deep bark with their high yaps. The girls left the path and wove between the gnarled and twisted trunks of ancient olives.

They found the dogs standing near a quince bush by the steep mountain side. Scuto stopped barking when they appeared and took a few steps towards them, tail wagging. Then he trotted back to the bush.

'Scuto! You found the amulet! Good boy!' Flavia knelt to hug Scuto round the neck while Nubia gently brushed ash from the tender blossom of a pink flower. Using a sharp stone Flavia dug it out, careful not to damage the bulb.

'Behold!' cried Nubia, who had been searching for more amulet behind the quince bush.

The shrub hid the entrance to a cave.

'That's what they were barking at,' said Flavia,