HEWSON

THE VILLA OF MYSTERIES

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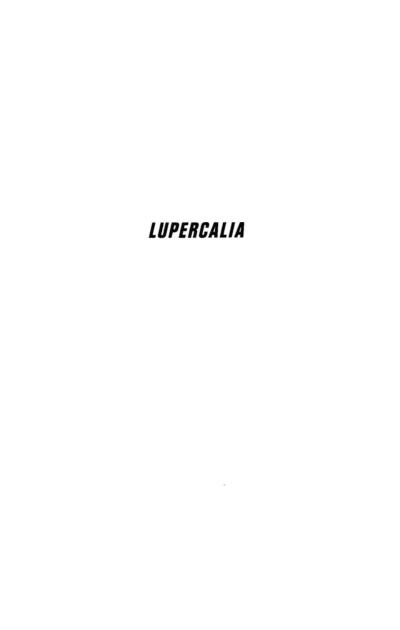
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Bobby and Lianne Dexter were good people. They owned a brand new timber mansion on an acre plot cut into a vast green swathe of pines thirty miles outside Seattle. They put in long hours for Microsoft down the road, Bobby in marketing, Lianne in finance. They hiked every weekend and, once a year, made it to the summit of Mount Rainier. They worked out too, though Bobby still couldn't keep what he called the 'family tummy-pudge' coming through over the belt of his jeans. And that at just thirty-three.

The Dexters were quiet, comfortably wealthy middleclass Americans. Except for two weeks a year, in spring, when they went abroad on vacation. They'd reasoned this through. It was all a question of balance. Work hard for fifty weeks of the year. Party hard for the remaining two. Preferably somewhere the locals didn't know you, where different rules applied. Or maybe didn't apply at all. Which was why, on a chill February day, they were ten miles outside Rome, dead drunk on red wine and grappa, seated in a hired Renault Clio which Bobby was driving much too fast over the potholes of an unmarked

lane that ran from a back road behind Fiumicino airport down towards the flat, grey line of the meandering Tiber.

Lianne glanced at her husband, making sure he didn't see the anxiety in her face. Bobby was still fuming. He'd had the metal detector out all morning, hunting around the outskirts of Ostia Antica, the excavated remains of imperial Rome's one-time coastal harbour. Just when he got a couple of beeps out of the thing a pair of fierce-looking archaeology types came out of the site and began screaming at them. Neither of them understood Italian but they got the drift. Either they packed up the metal detector and got out of there pronto or the Dexter annual vacation was likely to end in fisticuffs with a couple of punchy-looking spic students who were only too ready and eager for action.

Bobby and Lianne had retired hurt to a nearby roadside *osteria* where, to add insult to injury, the waiter, an unshaven lout in a grubby sweatshirt, had lectured both on how wrong it was to pronounce the word 'pasta' as 'pahstah', the American way.

Bobby had listened, his white, loose cheeks reddening with fury, then snapped, 'Just gimme a fucking steak then.' And added a litre of *rosso della casa* to the order just for good measure. Lianne said nothing. She knew when it was smart to acquiesce to Bobby's mood. If things got too bad drinkwise they could always dump the car at the airport and take a cab back into town. Not that Italians minded about drunk driving. They did it all the time, it seemed to her. Or at least she assumed they did. Italy was like that. Lax. She and Bobby were just behaving like the locals.

'I cannot believe these people,' Bobby complained as he rolled the Clio over a pile of dried mud that had

caked neatly into a solid ridge after the recent winter rain. 'I mean like . . . don't they have enough of this fucking stuff as it is?'

Lianne knew what the problem was. The previous autumn the Jorgensens had returned from vacation in Greece with a gorgeous marble bust the size of a soccer ball. It was of a young man, maybe Alexander the Great they said, with a full head of hair and a pretty, slightly feminine face. They kept it quiet at first, just to get the effect right. Then, out of the blue, Tom Jorgensen had invited them over to their extended Scandinavian-style cabin just down the lane - which had three storeys, mind, and a good acre and a half out back - on the pretext of a social drink. Really it was all about the marble head. Jorgensen let it be known he'd 'found' it by hanging around the edge of some archaeological excavation outside Sparta, waiting till the diggers had gone home and then bribing one of the locals to take him to where the mother lode lay. Tom had talked a good deal about how he smuggled it out of the country as excess baggage. It was all, Lianne suspected, one of Tom's stories. Really he'd just bought it at the store like everyone else. The big, muscular bastard was always spinning a line about something or other. It was why he'd jumped over Bobby's head to get into all the sexy music and TV stuff the company was doing now, meeting rock stars and movie people while Bobby, who was just as bright, maybe brighter even, was still lumbered with the tedious geeks who came over horny about databases.

But Tom's little act had struck home. Two weeks later Bobby announced that their annual vacation the coming spring would be in Italy. He hadn't even asked her opinion. Lianne was quietly hoping for Aruba. All the

same, she demurred. It was the best thing to do, and, as it turned out, Rome hadn't been a bad choice. In fact, she was starting to like the place. Then, that morning, it had all turned worse. Some creepy British academic type had given them a history lecture over buffet breakfast in the hotel. About how this was the day of the dead for the ancient Romans, a day when they would sacrifice a goat or a dog and wipe its blood on the foreheads of their kids, just to make sure they remembered their ancestors. The history link pushed Bobby's buttons. Fifteen minutes later he was tracking down a hire company, renting the metal detector.

So now they were in the middle of nowhere, dead drunk, clueless about what to do next. Lianne pined for Aruba and the pain was all the worse because she'd no idea what the place was like. Without letting Bobby see she put a hand on the steering wheel and turned the lurching Clio just far enough away from a boulder coming up at them from the right. The track was getting narrower all the time. There were still mud holes here and there from some recent rain. Maybe they'd get the car stuck and have to walk back to the road for help. She didn't like that idea. She hadn't brought the shoes.

'It's just pure greed, Bobby,' she said. 'What else can you say?'

'I mean... what does it matter? If I don't find the shit it stays right there in any case! It's not like you see any fucking Italians digging the crap out of the ground.'

He was wrong there. She'd seen digs all over the place, half of them looking abandoned, maybe because they just didn't have the bodies to do all that digging. All the same it was best to go along with his gut feeling.

'They don't need it, Bobby. They got more than they can cope with already. They got it coming out their ears.'

They had too. Her mind was still reeling from all the museums they'd visited these past two days. There was so much *stuff*. And unlike Bobby, she'd read the guidebooks. She knew they'd only scratched the surface. The pair of them were spending an entire *week* in Rome and would still come away without seeing everything. It seemed excessive. Bad planning. Poor taste. Bobby was right. If they had any manners they'd share it around a little.

The car headed down into a crater, leapt out the other side, briefly became airborne then slammed onto the ground with a bang. It sounded to her as if something had come loose underneath. She scanned the view ahead. Beyond the funny-looking grass, which seemed more like the kind of plants you got in marshland or bogs than on the beach she was expecting, lay a grey, scummy ribbon of water. The road came to a dead end a little way short of the low bank. Bobby had to get out here, have his fun – or otherwise – and then they needed to take the car back to Avis and scuttle off into the city before anyone noticed the dents and worse she felt sure would be there.

'Don't you worry,' she said. 'You're going to find something here, Bobby. I just know it. You're going to find something and when you do that asshole Tom Jorgensen is going to be as jealous as hell. You—'

He kicked down hard on the brakes, bringing the little car to a sudden halt twenty yards short of the end of the lane. Her husband was now staring into her face with that cold, hard expression she only saw once or twice a year, and hated, more than anything, hated so

much that sometimes she wondered whether marrying Bobby Dexter, tubby Bobby, the one all the other girls laughed at behind his back, had really been such a good idea at all.

'What?' Bobby asked in a flat, dead tone that was supposed to be full of meaning.

'I only, only, only—' She stuttered into silence.

He prodded her chest with a stubby finger. She could smell the booze on his breath.

'You really think this is all about Tom Fucking Jorgensen?'

'No!'

'You really think I have researched, booked, paid for this entire fucking vacation, taken you to all these beautiful places, brought you out here to this stinking backwater . . . all because of Tom Fucking Jorgensen and his shitty piece of marble?'

She paused before answering. In three years of marriage Bobby had reduced her to tears only once and that was in Cancun over a sexual demand she regarded as irrational, unnecessary and intrinsically unhygienic. The memory still smarted. She didn't understand why it wouldn't go away.

'I didn't. It just seemed. I don't know—' All the wrong words tumbled out of her mouth.

'Jesus!' Bobby roared. 'Jesus Christ!'

He gunned the accelerator, rammed the Clio into first and let go of the clutch. The little car lurched bravely forward with a gut-wrenching start, veered to one side and impaled itself on a small dried mud mountain which appeared, to Lianne anyway, to contain the stump of a fence post at its heart. They were now pitched up at an awkward, sickening angle. The front right wheel

screamed impotently as the mud mountain levered the entire right front end of the Clio into thin air.

Bobby stared at Lianne accusingly. 'Fucking wonderful,' he grunted. 'Oh so fucking wonderful.'

She was crying, trying to choke back the sobs.

'Don't do this to me, Lianne. Not today. You're not in Cancun now. You can't go phone that animal you call a father and get him to come round and threaten to beat my brains to a pulp just 'cos you got a headache or something.'

Telling her old man had been a mistake. She knew that all along. But Bobby had asked for it. He crossed the line in Cancun. She needed to let him know.

'Bobby-' she blubbed.

He stared out of the window at the grey river and the sluggish movement of scum on its surface.

'Yeah?'

'I can smell gas,' she said, suddenly serious, the tears drying almost instantly under the rising presence of fear. 'Can't you?'

'Jesus,' he gasped and punched at her seat belt then stabbed open the passenger door. She smiled at him, glassy-eyed. He'd done it for her. Before he unfastened his own belt.

'Bobby-'

He pushed her out of the door. 'Get out for chrissake. Dumb stupid bitch—'

Bobby Dexter took one last look to make sure she was safe then turned round, flung a few things from the back seat out onto the ground and rolled out of the crazily skewed car himself. He was so drunk he did a quick one eighty and wound up on the cold, hard earth

banging his elbows painfully. Bobby got in a good chunk of swearing about that.

He pushed himself upright with a weary hand, picked up his things, then checked she'd got herself well distant from the smell of gas. Lianne watched from the side of the road, a good ten yards from the dying Clio, her hands clasped behind her back looking like a schoolgirl waiting to be told what to do.

He walked over to join his wife.

'You OK?' he asked. He looked a little worried about how far this was going. That was something, she thought.

'Sure.' She'd stopped crying. He looked glad of that. It was something.

There was a sound from the car, a sort of breathy whoosh. They watched as a thin finger of flame flickered out from under the hood and worked its way up the windshield

'Now that . . .' Bobby said, 'is what I like about rental vehicles. They can do this sort of shit in front of your eyes and you just get to stand back and enjoy the show. Wish I'd hired something bigger now.'

The low scuttering wind caught the flames, rolled them over the roof of the Clio, sent them swirling inside the window, eating up the seats where, just a minute or so before, Bobby and Lianne Dexter had sat arguing. Then, with a sudden roar and a puff of heat and smoke, the Renault was ablaze, devouring itself in a cloud of black smoke and flame

Lianne clung to her husband's arm watching the spectacle. Bobby was right. This was Avis's problem. This was what they were for. Why they charged the kind of prices they did.

'What are we going to do now, Bobby?' she wondered. Then she looked at him and found, to her relief, Bobby Dexter was smiling, happy once more, for the first time in hours.

He held up one of the things he'd taken from the back seat of the car. The metal detector they'd hired that very morning somewhere near the hotel in Rome.

'What we came here for,' Bobby Dexter said. 'Daddy's going a-hunting.'

She ventured a laugh and wondered if it came out wrong. Maybe it did. Maybe not. It didn't matter anyway. Bobby Dexter wasn't listening. He was working his way down to the river, walking over the odd, boggy ground that felt as if it might give way beneath them at any moment. He had the headphones on, listening. And pretty soon Bobby Dexter was laughing too. Something must have been coming through loud and clear. Lianne walked to join him. They were just twenty yards short of the river now. There wasn't another soul around for miles. Anything they found here now was surely theirs.

'Hear that?'

She took the headphones from him and held one earpiece to her head. It was beeping like crazy, like a kid's game from years ago.

'Fucking Tom Jorgensen,' Bobby spat and she didn't dare look into his eyes when he was talking like this. 'I'll teach that big fat bastard. Get me the gear.'

He was skulking in the little coffee bar around the corner from the Questura when Barbara Martelli walked in, dressed in her immaculate black uniform, helmet in

hand, her long, blonde tresses bouncing above her collar with each step.

'Nic,' she said, looking surprised. 'You're back at work?'

'First day,' he replied, glancing at his watch. 'When I decide to turn up.'

'Ah.'

'How are you, Barbara?'

'I'm fine. I'm always fine. And you?'

He drained the macchiato. 'Yeah.'

'In case you forgot, this isn't the café the cops use.'

'So why are you here?'

She laughed. Barbara Martelli was about his height, with the kind of figure that turned every head in the station and a shock of blonde curls that seemed too full to squeeze inside that small black helmet. Her face was wrong for a cop. Too attractive, too ready to break into a smile. She looked as if she ought to be on the TV, announcing the weather or introducing some show. Instead she just floated around Rome on her big bike, handing out tickets with such charm the word was some people simply started speeding the moment they realized she was on their tail.

Back in the old days, before the shooting that put him on his back, fighting demons, Nic Costa wondered sometimes whether she was sweet on him. A couple of the guys egged him on to ask her for a date . . . provided he told everything afterwards. It didn't happen. She was just too perfect. She topped every driving exam, behind the wheel and on the force motorbikes. She was a tidy shot too, a talent that got her into most diplomatic assignments. Barbara Martelli was just a little too perfect to touch.

'Sometimes you have to escape for a while, Nic. Is that what you're doing? If so it's a little early. You have to get back in the ring if you want to hear the bell.'

'I'm having a coffee,' he mumbled.

'How long has it been?'

'Six months.' Six long months of slow recovery from the shooting and the mental damage that followed. Sometimes he wondered if he'd ever make it, whether he wanted to at all.

She looked at him frankly. She was, the more he thought about it, very possibly the most attractive woman inside the Questura. He was amazed he'd never asked her out. Not that he wanted anything to happen. She was just good company to be around, someone who could make you feel special. He didn't really know her at all.

'You do want to come back, don't you? It's not just Falcone pushing you into this?'

'No. I mean. I can't think of anything else. Can you?' 'No.'

'We're all like that, aren't we?' he said. 'Short of a choice.'

He listened to his own voice and found himself disliking what he heard. What was there? Resentment? Selfpity? He was twenty-eight. He'd never talked like that before. He had been changed by what was now known as 'the Denney case', an unresolved mess of entanglements that had cost his partner, Luca Rossi, his life, and almost left Costa dead too. This new Nic Costa no longer ran every time he wanted to clear his head, pounding the pavements around the Campo dei Fiori, arms flailing like a madman. He'd sold his tiny apartment in the Vicolo del Bologna and moved into his late father's old

home, the sprawling farmhouse off the Via Appia Antica where he grew up. Costa's physical wounds were, for the most part, healed; the internal ones still ached from time to time.

Nic Costa continued to miss Luca Rossi's taciturn wit and astute insight, wishing he'd learned to appreciate them more during their brief time working together. He knew, too, that he would return to work touched by the cold, sceptical hardness of the world. It had become necessary to embrace what Falcone, who had single-handedly talked him out of a wheelchair and back into the force, would call 'pragmatism'.

Falcone, the cold, single-minded inspector, regarded this transition as inevitable. Maybe he was right. Costa, who with his old self hated cynicism, the defeatism that said sometimes you had to make the best of a bad job because the alternative was to lose the fight completely, was still unsure. He didn't like the idea of trimming his principles to match the awkward, unyielding shape of brute reality. That much of his father – a stubborn, unbending Communist politician who made more enemies from his honesty than most men did through their deceit – remained.

Barbara Martelli downed the tiny coffee. She was thinking. She seemed briefly troubled, he thought, as if there was something she didn't want to say. 'I know what you mean.'

'You do?'

'About the choices.'

Something crossed her face then, some shadow of doubt, of unhappiness, and it struck him that Barbara Martelli's appearance wasn't always an advantage. It could be a burden too. This was how people judged her,