

FATAL LEGACY

Also by Lindsey Davis

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FATAL LEGACY

Lindsey Davis


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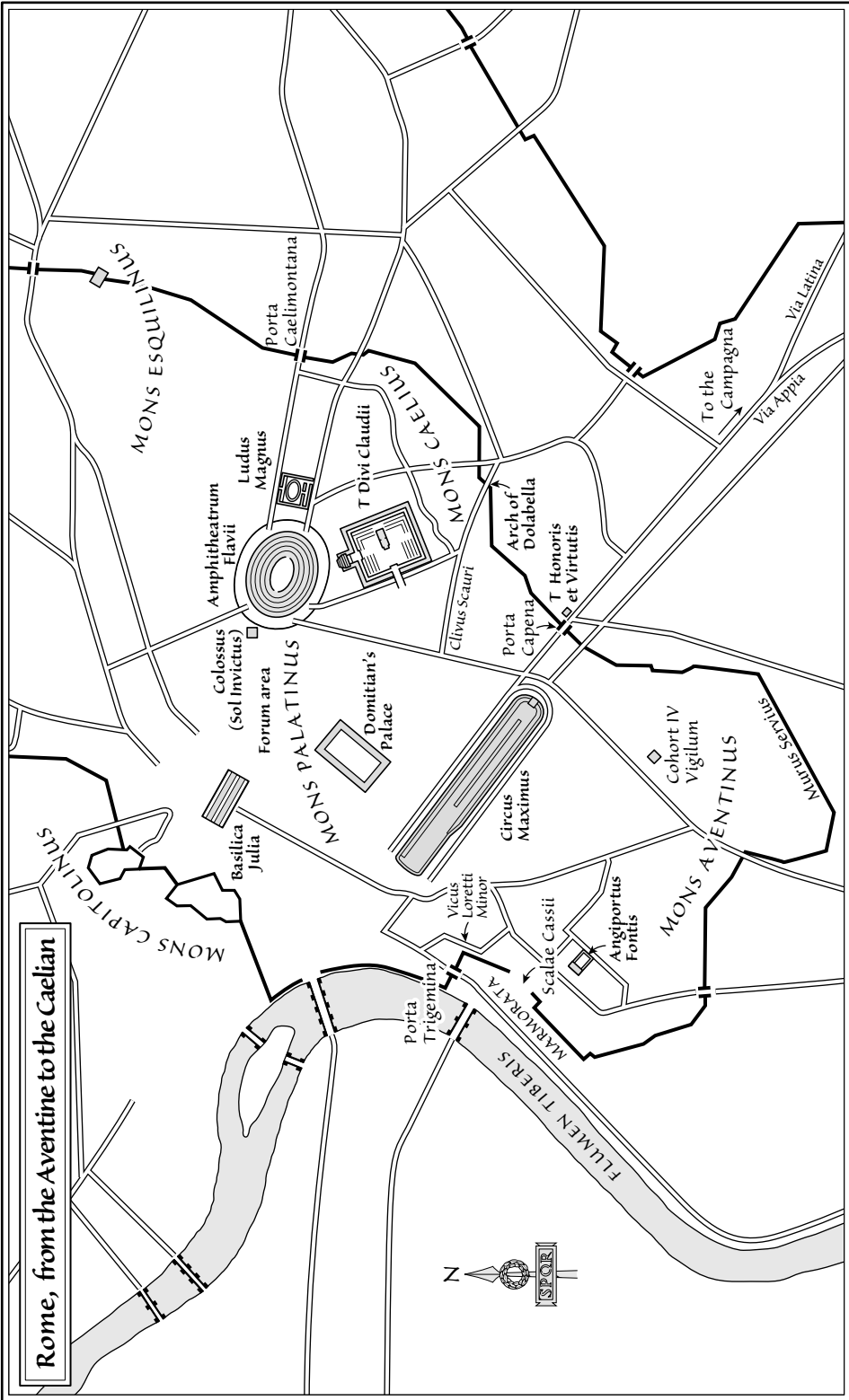
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FATAL LEGACY

Rome, from the Aventine to the Caelian



MONS ESQUILINUS

Amphitheatrum Flavium

Ludus Magnus

Colossus (Sol Invictus)

Forum area

MONS SALATINUS

Domitian's Palace

T Divi Claudii

MONS CAELIUS

Clivus Scavori

Arch of Dolabella

Porta Capena

T Honoris et Virtutis

To the Campagna

Via Lattina

Via Appia

MONS CAPITOLINUS

Basilica Julia

MONS SALATINUS

Circus Maximus

Vicus Loretti Minor

Angiportus Fontis

MONS AVENTINUS

Cohort IV Vigilium

MONS CAELIUS

Porta Trigemina

MARMORATA

FLUMEN TIBERIS

N



**Rome, AD 90:
Aventine, Caelian and Forum Romanum**

Plaintiffs and Agents

Some of the Usual Suspects

Flavia Albia	honest debt collector and investigator
Tiberius Manlius	her husband, an ambiguous contractor
Gaius and Lucius	dear little nephews
<i>Their household:</i> Gratus the smooth steward; Dromo the dim slave; Paris the cheeky runabout; Fornix the celebrity chef; Suza the hopeful beautician; Barley the shy dog; Mercury the placid donkey; Glaphyra the diligent nurse; Rodan the seedy door-keeper	
Marcia and Corellius	difficult visitors
Falco and Helena	renowned parents
Julia, Favonia and Postumus	interesting siblings
Tullius	a rich uncle
Junia	a hopeless aunt
Aelianus and Justinus	lovable uncles with specialist knowledge
Mygdonius	a wills expert

In the Catering Industry

Junillus and Apollonius	at the Stargazer (previously Flora's)
Rufus	at the Valerian (ex the Colossus)
Rumpus and the skivvy	at Nobilo's
A bunch of lying rascals	at the Comet
Thymellus	at the Little Caelian Caupona
Titus	on the Aventine bread round

At the Basilica Julia

Honorius	a legal hound
Mamillianus	a principal lawyer (not in evidence)
Hermeros	his office manager

Crispinus	a Mamillianus Associate, freely associating
Nincundio	a very angry man
Felicula	looking for a good lawyer

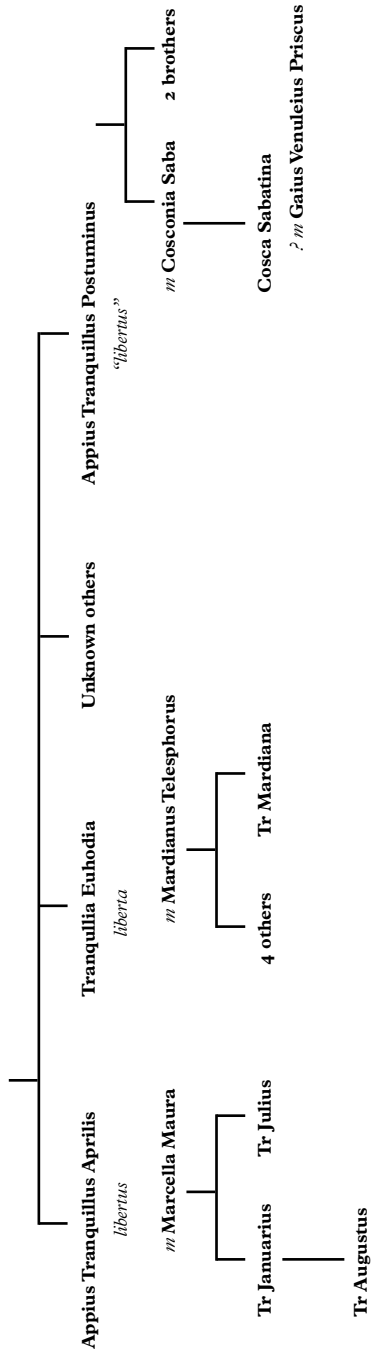
The Tranquilli and the Prisci *See family trees*

Slaves or freedmen used as collateral, etc: Philodamus the book-keeper, Erotillus the archive clerk, Dindius the basket-seller, Dindius's son the helpful boy

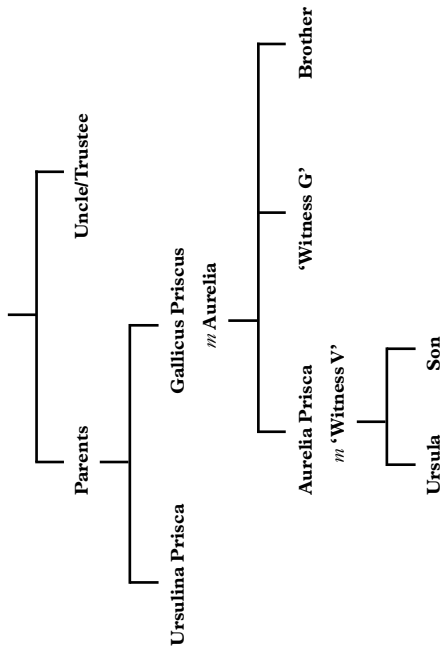
Family Tree of the Tranquilli

APPIUS TRANQUILLUS SURUS

Hedylla m?
"liberta"



Family tree of the Prisci (partial)



I

According to my old note-tablets, the Tranquillus case began with Spanish rabbits. They were widely traded so there must have been money in it. That was always good news when, as a private investigator, I took on new clients.

This key item in the Roman food chain was certainly known to anyone who frequented the Stargazer. Our family's greasy spoon was managed by my aunt Junia, wife to the most boring man on the Aventine, Gaius Baebius. She used to hide rabbit bones and other inedible parts in the evening hotpots she sold over the counter to the dimmer kind of Aventine workers – those who had never realised that better bars were available. Junia's stew was no favourite, even among her crazily compliant customers. Apart from the danger of choking on unseen ribs, sometimes whole furry ears plopped out into serving bowls and splashed people's tunics. The ears could be tossed out into the street, but local laundries had started to be difficult when asked to tackle stains caused by the liquor that Junia called gravy. As was regularly pointed out, it was worse than axle grease.

People who dared challenge my aunt were few. However, it had been suggested that her stewing meat was not even rabbit, but some creature of similar size that had been offered at the back door by a rat-catcher. Nobody said this more than once. When Junia had stopped raving, they had to go and eat at the

Valerian. The Valerian was to feature in my case too, along with Nobile's, the Comet, and the Little Caelian Caupona.

My work for Aunt Junia began mundanely enough, with not a bunny in sight. One chilly lunchtime in January, two people chose to have a meet-and-eat at the Stargazer. They were a man and a woman, both married, though not to each other. The caupona waiters, Apollonius and Junillus, immediately spotted that: their customers wore wedding rings, yet the way they held hands and the intensity of their conversation gave away that they were philandering. Waiters always know.

The visiting duo ordered from the muzzy chalked board, which showed they were new customers. Whatever they had asked for, they were served hard-boiled eggs, the dish of the day. It was the only dish of every day, at lunchtime. Sometimes a few flakes of mackerel were scattered on top, generally not. Anyone who hated fish had to pick it off. The Stargazer did not confuse its customers with menu choice.

The waiters were an elderly man and a lad. It was over-staffing for their level of trade in winter, though typical for a bar that did not offer waitress service. I mean by that what my husband calls a garlicky tryst upstairs, with a dose of warts as afters. The Stargazer was so hopeless it had never managed to organise its upper rooms for such a purpose. That failure could be why our place was struggling.

The two waiters were busy – not whizzing about serving, but heads together over a geometry problem they had drawn on the counter, using lines of garum sauce. Once the new customers had been supplied with food bowls, along with their bill in a saucer, they were left to their own devices. They had not seemed to mind, as they stared into each other's eyes and barely talked.

The geometry hobby gripped our waiters. Apollonius had once been a teacher. Rome's most recent emperors were said to value education, but he had found it impossible to earn a living at his street-corner school. Ours was a rough district. Learning was a low priority; it came well after gambling and wasting money on evil-eye amulets or, if you absolutely could not avoid it, paying your rent. Reduced to pessimistic begging, Apollonius had been given work by the Stargazer's previous manager to stop him blocking the pavement in front of her bar. After twenty years of serving gut-rot here, he still mentally believed he would one day resume teaching. He disciplined the Stargazer's customers with well-trying teaching methods, like sternness and sarcasm, although he was discouraged from beating them with a stick unless they seriously misbehaved.

Nowadays he shared both serving and geometry with my cousin Junillus. Aunt Junia's eighteen-year-old son was deaf, though he tackled it cheerfully. A bright soul, he enjoyed problem-solving with Apollonius; cheeky by nature, Junillus loved the fact that mathematics was viewed as politically suspect. All our family kicked back at the government, a trait he had absorbed even though he was adopted. As a baby, he had been dumped in a skip, no doubt because of his disability; my father had found him whimpering among the building rubble and lacked the heart to walk away.

My childless aunt and her husband had then decided that it would be best if *they* took this scrap and taught him to cope with life, even though two people with less understanding of life would be hard to find. All the rest of us thought Junia and Gaius Baebius were ghastly, yet in their way they loved him, so the easy-going Junillus shrugged and truly loved them back. By some dedicated process, they had

helped him to lip-read and even to talk, so I suppose they weren't all bad.

Once he was old enough, Junillus enjoyed his work at our family bar. He improved the Stargazer as much as he could, however hard Junia tried to make the place the worst take-away on the Aventine. It only survived because it was on a good route for passing labourers; busy times were just after dawn and in the early evening. My husband and I had been known to rendezvous there during the day, but we could claim a family discount; it offered few attractions for courting couples.

Apollonius and Junillus had let the pair who came on that particular day have an inside table. Perhaps the lovers had deliberately chosen an empty caupona so they could smooch in private. They certainly hadn't come for the ambiance or conversation. They allowed themselves to be fobbed off with rubbery eggs and they poured their own nips from a very small flagon. Given the poor menu, they stayed quite a long time.

When they wanted to leave, they stood up, slid into their cloaks, then waved their bill at the 'busy' waiters to indicate agreement in the traditional way – *No need to come over, we are leaving the money on the table.*

Junillus, being deaf, only noticed the gesture. Apollonius heard the chink of what he assumed to be coins rattling into the pottery saucer. But when he went to pick up the money, it was the old scam: three metal rivets.

That evening, when his mother came to cash up, Junillus confessed. Furious, Aunt Junia immediately banned these customers, who were unlikely to return in any case. She raved that there had been much too much cheating lately; all

the bars were suffering after Saturnalia. Most other proprietors were lackadaisical wimps, but the queen of the Aventine planned to act. It was the second day of January, so not too late for a New Year Resolution, even a doomed one. Junia would penalise punters who left without paying – or, in other words, she would instruct Junillus and Apollonius to stop it happening. (They received her edict with hidden grins.) Undeterred, Junia hung up a notice that henceforth all defaulters would be named, shamed and prosecuted.

Who would file a court claim, especially for such a puny amount as a bar bill? She soon decided against the legal costs but remained dead set on recovery. Since her brother, the informer, was still holidaying at the coast (I knew Falco was back, but he had deliberately not told her), Junia decreed that the other investigator she knew, her niece – that was me, worse luck – must track down the two culprits.

So I, Flavia Albia, had to recover the money, did I? After stressing that the Stargazer was a family business, therefore it was my duty, Junia applied more pressure. Like Junillus, my personal history had involved being an abandoned child, discovered by Falco and his wife, who were always rescuing sad little mites. I had been about fourteen when they ran across me: unwashed, untaught and surly. In my case no one else came forward to take me in so they had to bring me up themselves. Junia now explained how I ought to be grateful that I had been adopted from hideous Britain by generous Romans, when nobody could guess how awful my origins were or how badly I might turn out. She managed not to imply I *had* turned out badly, because even Junia could produce fake tact when it affected her own interests. But she claimed this favour was the least I could do as thanks.

The people I really thanked were Falco and Helena. They took it as their reward that I was alive, sane, cheerful, useful to the community and even rather well married to a man they approved of. None of that impressed Junia. She would always see me as the dangerous product of a vile province. At my wedding to a magistrate, she had been first in the queue to complain about the catering and to prophesy that our marriage wouldn't last.

It would, dammit. He was lovely. I was determined. Anyway, we had bought a house.

Now Junia needed me. I could have said no; I should have done. But I was fond of Junillus. While his mother pressurised me, he was giving me his doe-eyed look: if the reckoning remained unpaid, he would have trouble at home . . .

I caved in. 'Give me their bill and those rivets. That's evidence. I will need a fee, Auntie, though of course it goes down as an expense for you.'

Junia found accountancy too complicated, despite us all explaining how to assign her deductibles. Falco had worked on the Census once so he knew all the tricks about tax. Although Junia appeared intelligent, she could not grasp that if I traced the absconders I would add my fee to their bill. Then her husband could deduct this genuine business expense from his notifiable income. Gaius Baebius would like that; he had worked in the customs service, so he was hot on withholding money from the treasury, as he had seen so many other people do.

Junia sniffed in her charmless way. She was a middle-aged woman who had never enjoyed life, even though hers had been relatively comfortable. It was too late now for her to fool around with concepts like making herself endearing. 'I hope you'll get a move on, Albia. I am not intending to pay

you until you bring the cash – and I don't want to hear about any of your horrible Druidic methods. My caupona has a reputation.'

Too right, it had. Though not the one she pretended.

Thanks to my excellent Roman education from Falco and Helena, I knew magic was a forbidden practice. Unless you could evade arrest by hiding in a mystic cloud when the troops came for you, in Roman law the penalty was death. I needed to stop Junia shouting in that abrasive voice of hers that my work involved the occult. Being an informer caused enough confrontations with the authorities.

'I shall recover your money,' I assured her patiently. Clients need you to sound confident. 'It won't require a bunch of mistletoe.'

I never understood why people in Rome liked thinking I was a Druid. Even back in Britannia, Druids were banned. Despite that, I had met one once: a smelly, long-haired old poseur from the west, as most were. He had said he liked little girls – then tried to back me against a log-store and interfere with me. His second sight had failed to forewarn him that I would kick him below the tunic belt and race for freedom, like a streak of moonlight.

I had been a Londinium street urchin, so I had learned a few survival tricks – but I knew no spells. Soon I would regret that. Sorting out the Tranquillus family would have been so much easier with supernatural powers. And among their complicated troubles, our unpaid bill was only the start.

2

My first need was to identify the defaulters, so I had to question the witnesses. ‘You were doing your puzzle on the counter,’ I tackled them in a professional tone, ‘but please try to recall what they looked like.’ Since they knew me, Apollonius and Junillus shuffled gormlessly, each waiting for the other to speak. ‘Was anybody else here who might remember these cheats?’ They shook their heads. ‘No other customers?’

‘Oh, we are always much too popular at lunchtime!’ butted in Junia, to whom self-delusion came naturally. ‘People must have stayed away because they thought they would have a problem finding space.’ Junillus screwed the tip of one forefinger into his temple, the classic gesture to tell me his mother was mad. ‘Naughty boy!’ she chided. She mouthed the words carefully, but he knew he could get away with cheek so he did not bother to look.

I pretended to put the two waiters under hypnosis. ‘I am taking you back . . . You are completely relaxed, feeling warm and sleepy . . .’

‘This is normal for us.’ Apollonius must have been over seventy, but he could play-act as annoyingly as the infants he had once taught. He leaned on the counter and pretended to snooze.

‘Drop it! Let us remember the scene. It is lunchtime again. A gloomy old morning, just two days into the fresh

consulship of those top tribunal heroes, Domitian and Nerva, that's God-on-earth, our paranoid Emperor, and his junior colleague, widely known as Who-the-doodah-is-he? Got it now? It's Mercury day. Fine drizzle and oppressive government. Now two soppy lovers come wandering by, and as they are looking for somewhere to drool over each other, they decide this is the most romantic bar they can find.'

Junillus repeated his 'crackpots' gesture. Though loyal, he accepted that the Stargazer was a sorry hole. Only able to agree, I gazed around at its cracked plaster walls, the blackening spiders' webs, the emaciated cat, the counter pots where yesterday evening's congealed hot food had hardened into sludge around their chipped rims. 'I suppose the hand-holding couple must have tried all the better bars on other days.'

'What "better bars"?' snapped Junia, tensing up so much her skinny ringlets bounced.

Following my rule not to fight with my client in the first few hours of being hired, I restrained myself. 'The bars they can't go back to because they have already cheated the waiters once.' She gave me her sniff again. 'Have you got a cold, Aunty?' She hated to be called that. Her preferred address would have been 'Augusta', like an empress who had impressed the Senate and won extreme honours. One who was known to poison people who crossed her.

'Junillus, buck up. Describe the man.'

'I am deaf. I do not understand.'

'No, you are a clever boy, goofing about.' I grabbed him by the shoulders, pointing to his own features and exaggerating my words. 'Marcus Baebius Junillus: you yourself are average height, brown eyes, need a haircut, stubble botched by

your barber. You are wearing a short-sleeved grey tunic with part of its braid loose – you must be perished, but it’s to show off these dashing wristbands – and your apron needs to go to the laundry, not tomorrow but today.’

‘Red cloak,’ he offered, batting rather beautiful lashes over big, dark brown eyes. My younger sisters were starting to adore him a little too much. ‘Man’s. Not really red. Squashed plum. Too long.’

‘Very helpful. More clues, please.’ Even though he could lip-read, I made further arm movements to illustrate. ‘Tall? Brawny? Wide face? Long chin? *Bearded?*’

Junillus looked puzzled; he was putting it on.

Witnesses were often idiots, so this was nothing new. I pressed on gamely: ‘Foreign or from here?’

‘Local,’ he condescended to say, this time consulting Apollonius.

‘Why so?’

Junillus only shrugged, while Apollonius slowly nodded. I took that to mean the non-payer had no eccentric garments or unusual features that would make him stand out on the Aventine. No help, of course, because we lived on the outsiders’ hill, the one with the temples where slaves were freed; most of the liberated looked as if they had originated in some far province, although they all dressed the same as their Roman masters and mistresses because they were in their owners’ cast-off clothes. Being near the wharves and the Emporium, the Aventine attracted foreign traders too. Some were swarthy, squinty-eyed, and had scars or digits missing, but so did plebeian Romans who had lived here since Romulus. (He was foreign, came from Latium, got off scot-free on both murder and rape charges: extremely dodgy character.)

Giving up on that, I tackled Apollonius about the woman. You have to try. He had never been married, and never seemed bothered by that, so I had no great hopes. Even so, he came up with ‘long-sleeved, straw-coloured tunic and big necklace’. Apollonius thought he would remember the necklace if he saw it again. That did not mean he could describe it.

This woman probably owned more than one anyway. She was free to come out from home to meet her lover, so not someone with demanding employment. A fashionable woman might by now have changed her gold collar for silver chains, but informers cannot go into people’s houses demanding to rifle through their jewellery caskets. ‘She’s out flirting, so she needs to be careful. If her husband bought her jewellery, she won’t want to tell him I grabbed it off her for a bar bill.’ Junillus and Apollonius had not given me enough clues – and these rascals knew it. ‘Try again, lads. You must have thought the couple looked respectable. Otherwise, wouldn’t you have taken payment when you first put their order in front of them?’ That point my witless witnesses were prepared to agree. When they weren’t absorbed in geometry, they were both shrewd servers.

I tried to determine the couple’s ages. ‘They are married, but they are having a fling. So, they were neither young nor decrepit?’

‘Tooth missing,’ Apollonius remembered suddenly.

‘Him?’

‘Her.’

‘Front?’

‘Side.’

‘Right?’

‘Left. No – right.’

It is fair to say that in Rome or any of the provinces anyone who was older than me was liable to have lost at least one tooth. Many only had one or two left.

Aunt Junia was growing bored. She would never have made an investigator. ‘I think that gives you plenty to work with, Flavia Albia!’

I nodded, pretended to agree, then waited until she waddled off home.

‘Holy moly, I thought she’d never leave. I need a drink, fellows.’

With Junia gone, their attitude perked up. Apollonius poured me a beaker, while Junillus was rooting somewhere.

‘Any olives?’

No olives. Junia ordered supplies so the Stargazer regularly ran out of everything.

My cousin produced a piece of used scroll from the basket where they kept scraps for writing bills. It smelt of old fish, *extremely* old, so I lent him a note-tablet and my stylus. I knew he was artistic; I watched without interrupting as Junillus made drawings.

The first time, he scribbled two cartoon faces, one comic, one tragic, mere doodles with lunatic expressions. I sighed. He settled down. He smoothed over the wax and began again several times, until he was satisfied. He showed me a man with a square head, regular features, and thick hair that came down quite low on his forehead, cut straight across.

‘Was he smiling like that?’ Junillus nodded. He even drew in more smile lines around the eyes and mouth. I chuckled. ‘He seems pleased with himself – out with his floozy, while his wife believes he is harmlessly conferring with his accountant. What about his lady-love?’

The female portrait had a long oval face, smooth hair drawn down over her ears from a centre parting, and a guarded expression. Her mouth was rather tightly closed, which hid the missing tooth Apollonius had mentioned. I tapped the tablet. ‘Do I see nerves? She thinks her suspicious husband may roll around the corner any minute – and she’s starting to feel Smiler isn’t worth the risk. Can you draw in her necklace?’

No: Junillus had not noticed any jewellery. Apollonius claimed the only things he himself could draw were a trapezium or a parallelogram. When asking other people about her, I would simply have to describe her as ‘well-dressed’.

Junillus and Apollonius finally decided to reveal a crucial fact: they knew that the couple had previously patronised the bar over the road. They had seen them coming out of the Valerian.

‘Now you tell me!’ I was annoyed but had to play it down. ‘What’s this – espionage? Do you always check the Valerian’s footfall?’

‘It was a quiet period at the Stargazer,’ declared Apollonius, bravely. He knew he worked in a dump.

‘Nobody came here all day, you mean?’ I ragged them. ‘So, you were gazing across the street and you saw them. Remember when?’

‘About a week ago.’

‘Mercury again?’

‘Could be.’

‘That must be their assignation day. He visits his accountant, and she gets her armpits de-fuzzed at a beauty parlour. They have trained everyone at home not to notice how long they spend out of their houses.’ These adulterers could have been at it for years, until their secret meetings were not even

exciting – although their intense hand-holding probably indicated the fling was a newer phenomenon.

I cheered up. At least the first expense I could add to the defaulters' bill would be a bowl of seafood and a beverage. Taking the tablet with my cousin's drawings, I went across the road to that well-regarded food outlet, the Valerian.

3

This was how a bar should be run. At ours, I had left Junillus and Apollonius preparing for the evening rush, a task that did not require them to hurry. At the Valerian a rush was already under way. Men in dusty tunics were leaning on their elbows. New arrivals were shouting orders to Rufus, the show-off waiter, competing for his attention; meanwhile Little Danae, his curly-haired child assistant, was applying a taper to oil-lamps' wicks as the winter dusk suddenly descended, while at the same time wiping down the counter after previous customers. She might be twelve, though she looked more like eight; two activities at once did not faze this efficient young girl. Give her a year and she'd be running the place. Even the cloth she was using looked more or less clean, though I knew it was probably someone's old loincloth.

The Valerian was not perfect. Seafood had run out. Whelks had been part-deleted from the menu board, using an elbow, judging by chalk on the waiter's tunic sleeve. Each morning Rufus toddled down to the quays for the fresh catch, but once the midday fare had all gone, that was it. Later, along with the twilight moths, a surreptitious stew arrived, illegal of course. Since Vespasian's reign, an edict said bars ought only to serve grains – as in *Yuk, what's this sippy muck?* – which Palace officials believed revolutionaries will not eat. Pulses

prevent plotting, according to them. So Brutus and Cassius must have been red-meat men: neither would touch lentils or black-eyed beans, let alone hairy vetch and lupin seeds . . .

Of course, the new food edict would have failed anyway, since Brutus and Cassius were aristos, who rendezvoused in their own fancy houses. There is no record of either grabbing a bite at a bar.

The Valerian's hotpot was little better than the Stargazer's. It offered tired workers what looked like comfort food, until someone was rash enough to taste it. Quality ingredients and careful preparation were never on offer. People were best to come early too, because once casseroles cooled down in the counter pot-holes, they just congealed.

When I arrived, typical conversations were occurring: 'Snakes alive! What's in this stuff, Rufus?'

'Roebuck.'

'Tastes like liniment.'

'He died of a cold. Do you want it or not?'

'Can I have my money back?'

'We don't do refunds.'

'Well, fricassée you!'

In Rome, that was the standard even at a good bar.

Rufus liked busy times. He was a showman, in speedy juggler mode. Skinny and lithe, he raced around behind the counter, swinging his trays and flagons, then slid the dice-pot along the mock-marble top to some demanding builders, pinched change from the old red gratuities crock for a departer, skirted Little Danae without knocking her over, then dealt out a shower of spoons to those starving customers who were prepared to brave the roebuck. Tossing back his long hair like a demigod, he flourished his ladle before plunging it into today's slow-simmered supper dish.

I decided now was not the time for a useful discussion. If I mentioned our cheats, Rufus would only laugh at the Stargazer's loss. I went home. That was what Rufus would tell me to do in any case.