

NEMESIS

LINDSEY DAVIS



NEMESIS

Also by Lindsey Davis

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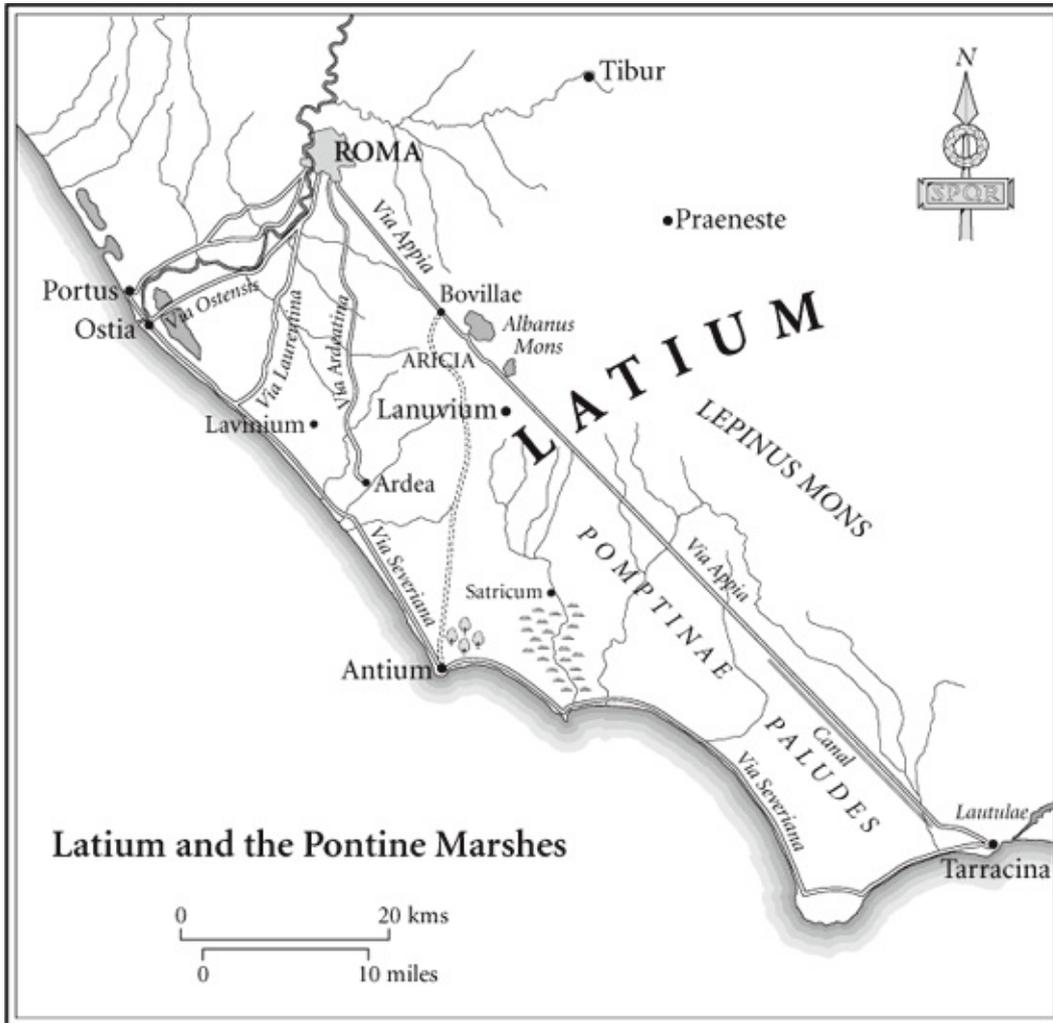
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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Marcus Didius Falco	a man of mixed fortunes and seeker after truth
Helena Justina	his true love, sought and won
Falco's family	low grade, but not as bad as they seem:
Junilla Tacita	formidable wife to the deplorable Geminus
Maia Favonia	Falco's sister, the best of the bunch
Flavia Albia	heart-broken and ready to break heads
Katutis	Falco's secretary, a disappointed man
Helena's family	high class, but not as good as they look:
Aulus Camillus Aelianus	keeping a low profile
Quintus Camillus Justinus	keeping his career on target, thanks to:
Claudia Rufina	his wife and financial backer
Lentullus	an accident waiting to happen
<i>Falco's associates in Rome</i>	
Lucius Petronius Longus	an upright vigiles enquirer (low pay)
Lucius Petronius Rectus	his brother, feeling off colour
Nero	their ox, another one gone missing
Tiberius Fuscus	Petro's second in command
Sergius	their whip man (always encouraging)
Clusius	a devious rival auctioneer (low motives)
Gaius	a dubious apprentice (high hopes)
Gornia	a tight-lipped porter (no comment)
Septimus Parvo	a family lawyer (<i>absolutely</i> no comment)
Thalia	a contortionist with a problem to wriggle out of
Philadelphion and Davos	her lovers, keeping well off the scene
Minas of Karystos	a lawyer, on the up
Hosidia Meline	a bride (on the make?)
<i>Also in Rome</i>	
Tiberius Claudius Laeta	a smooth bureaucrat with high aspirations
Momus	a rough-edged auditor with low habits
Tiberius Claudius Anacrites	the Chief Spy, a high-flyer of low worth
The Melitans	his agents (dodgy connections)
Perella	an assassin who wants a new job (her boss's)
Heracleides	party-planner to the stars
Nymphidias	his thieving chef
Scorpus	a singer, spying on spies (an idiot)
Alis	a fortune-teller who blames Mum (a wise woman)
Arrius Persicus	a philanderer, oversexed and over-budget
A courier	newly wed and newly dead
Volusius	Mum's boy, a numerate victim



ROME AND LATIUM: SUMMER, AD 77

1

I find it surprising more people are not killed over dinner at home. In my work we reckon that murder is most likely to happen among close acquaintances. Someone will finally snap after years of being wound up to blind rage by the very folk who best know how to drive them to distraction. For once it will be just too much to watch someone else eating the last sesame pancake—which, of course, was snatched with a triumphant laugh that was intended to rankle. So a victim expires with honey still dribbling down their chin—though it happens less often than you might expect.

Why are more kitchen cleavers not sunk between the fat shoulders of appalling uncles who get the slaves pregnant? Or that sneaky sister who shamelessly grabs the most desirable bedroom, with its glimpse of a corner of the Temple of Divine Claudius and almost no cracks in the walls? Or the crude son who farts uncontrollably, however many times he is told . . .

Even if people do not stab or strangle their own, you would expect more to rush out into the streets and vent their frustration upon the first person they meet. Perhaps they do. Perhaps even the random killing of strangers, which the vigiles call ‘a motiveless crime’, sometimes has an understandable domestic cause.

It could so easily have happened to us.

I grew up in a large family, crammed into a couple of small, sour rooms. All around our apartment were other teeming groups, too noisy, too obstreperous and all packed together far too close. Perhaps the thing that saved us from tragedy was that my father left home—his only escape from a situation he had come to find hideous, and an event which at least saved us from the burden of more children. Later my brother took himself off to the army; eventually I saw the sense of it and did the same. My sisters moved out to harass the feckless men they bullied into marriage. My mother, having brought up seven, was left alone but continued to have a strong influence on all of us. Even my father, once he returned to Rome, viewed Ma with wary respect.

As she continually reminded us, mothers can never retire. So, when my wife went into labour with our third child, in came Ma to boss everyone about, even though she was becoming frail and had eyesight problems. Helena’s own mama rushed to our house too, the noble Julia Justa rolling up her sleeves to interfere in her genteel way. We had employed a perfectly decent midwife.

At first the mothers battled for dominance. In the end, when they were both badly needed, all that stopped.

My new son died on the day he was born. At once, we felt we were living in a tragedy that was unique to us. I suppose that is how it always seems.

The birth had been easy, a short labour like our second daughter's. Favonia had taken a week to seize upon existence but then she thrived. I thought the same would happen. But when this baby emerged, he was already fading. He never responded to us; he slipped away within hours.

The midwife said a mother should hold a dead baby; afterwards she and Julia Justa had to wrestle to make Helena give up the body again. Helena went into deep shock. Women cleaned up, as they do. Helena Justina stayed in the bedroom, refusing comfort, ignoring food, declining to see her daughters, even distant with me. My sister Maia said this day would be black in Helena's calendar for the rest of her life; Maia knew what it was to lose a child. At first I could not believe Helena would ever come out of it. It seemed to me, we might never even reach that point where grief only overtook her on anniversaries. She stayed frozen at the moment when she was told her boy was dead.

All action fell to me. It was not a legal necessity, but I named him: Marcus Didius Justinianus. In my place many fathers would not have bothered. His birth would not be registered; he had no civic identity. Perhaps I was wrong. I just had to decide what to do. His mother had survived, but for the moment I was alone trying to hold the family together, trying to choose what formalities were appropriate. It all became even more difficult after I learned what else had happened on that day.

The tiny swaddled bundle had been placed in a room we rarely used. What was I to do next? A newborn should receive no funeral rites; he was too small for full cremation. Adult burials must be held outside the city; families who can afford it build a mausoleum beside a highroad for their embalmed bodies or cremation urns. That had never been for us; ashes of the plebeian Didi are kept in a cupboard for a time, and then mysteriously lost.

My mother revealed that she had always taken her stillborns to the Campagna farm where she grew up, but I could not leave my distraught family. Helena's father, the senator, offered me a niche in the tumbledown columbarium of the Camilli on the Via Appia, saying sadly, 'It will be a very small urn!' I thought about it, but was too proud. We live in a patriarchal society; he was my son. I don't give two figs for formal rules, but disposal was my responsibility.

Some people inter newborn babies under a slab in a new building; none was available and I jibbed at making our child into a votive offering. I don't annoy the gods; I don't encourage them either. We lived in an old town house at the foot of the Aventine, with a back exit, but almost no ground. If I dug a tiny grave among the sage and rosemary, there was a horrendous possibility children at play or cooks digging holes to bury fish bones might one day turn up little Marcus' ribs accidentally.

I climbed up to our roof terrace and sat alone with the problem.

The answer came to me just before stiffness set in. I would take my sad bundle out to my father's house. We ourselves had once lived there, up on the Janiculum Hill

across the Tiber; in fact, I was the idiot who first bought the inconvenient place. I had since worked a swap with my father but it still seemed like home. Although Pa was a reprobate, his villa offered the baby a resting place where, when Helena was ready for it, we could put up a memorial stone.

I wondered briefly why my father had not yet come with condolences. Normally when people wanted time alone, he was a first-footer. He could smell tragedy like newly cooked bread. He was bound to let himself in with that house key he would never give back to me, then irritate us with his insensitivity. The thought of Pa issuing platitudes to shake Helena out of her sadness was dire. He would probably try to get me drunk. Wine was bound to feature in my recovery one day, but I wanted to choose how, when and where the medicine was applied. The dose would be poured by my best friend Petronius Longus. The only reason I had not sought him out so far, was delicacy because he too had lost young children. Besides, I had things to do first.

My mother was staying at our house. She would continue to do so, as long as she believed she was needed. Perhaps that would be longer than we really wanted, but Ma would do what she thought best.

Helena wanted no part in the funeral. She turned away, weeping, when I told her what I planned to do. I hoped she approved. I hoped she knew that dealing with this was the only way I could try to help her. Albia, our teenaged foster daughter, intended to accompany me but in the end even she was too upset. Ma might have made the pilgrimage but I gratefully left her to look after little Julia and Favonia. I would not ask her to see Pa, from whom she had been bitterly estranged for thirty years. If I *had* asked, she might have forced herself to come and support me, but I had enough to endure without that worry.

So I went alone. And I was alone, therefore, when the subdued slaves at my father's house told me the next piece of bad news. On the same day that I lost my son, I lost my father too.

As I turned off the informal roadway into Pa's rough carriage drive, nothing appeared amiss. No smoke came from the new bath house. There was no one in sight; the gardeners had clearly decided that late afternoon was their time to down tools. The gardens, designed by Helena when we lived here, were looking in good fettle. Since Pa was an auctioneer, the statuary was exquisite. I thought Pa must be down in Rome, at his warehouse or his office in the Saepta Julia; otherwise on a warm summer evening I would expect to hear a low buzz and chinking wine paraphernalia as he entertained associates or neighbours, sprawling on the benches that permanently stood out beneath the old pine trees.

I had come in a closed litter. The dead baby lay in a basket on the opposite seat. I left it there temporarily. The bearers dropped me by the short flight of steps in the porch. I banged my fist on the big double doors to announce my presence and went straight indoors.

A peculiar scene met me. All the household slaves and freedmen stood assembled in the atrium as if they had been waiting for me.

I was startled. I was even more startled by the size of the sombre crowd filling the hallway. Tray-toters, pillow-plumpers, earwax-extractors, dust-dampers. I had never realised how many staff Pa kept. My father was missing from the scene. My heart started pounding unevenly.

I was wearing a black tunic instead of my usual hues. Still lost in the horror of the baby's death, I must have looked grim. The slaves seemed prepared for it, and oddly relieved to see me. 'Marcus Didius—you heard!'

'I heard nothing.'

Throats were cleared. 'Our dear master passed away.'

I was taken aback by that crazy phrase 'dear master'. Most people knew Pa as 'that bastard, Favonius' or even 'Geminus—may he rot in Hades with a bald crow perpetually eating his liver'. The bird would be pecking sooner than expected, apparently.

The whole bunch were deferring to me with new-found humility. If they felt awkward doing it, that was nothing to how I felt. They stood trying to hide the anxieties that characterise slaves of a newly dead citizen while they wait to know what will be done with them.

It could hardly be my problem, so I gave them no help. My father and I had been on bad terms after he left Ma; our reconciliation in recent years was patchy. He had no

rights over me and I took no responsibility for him. Somebody else must be designated to deal with his effects. Somebody else would keep or sell the slaves.

I would have to tell the family he was gone. That would cause all sorts of bad feelings.

This was turning into a bad year.

Officially, it was the year of the consuls Vespasianus Augustus and Titus Caesar (Vespasian, our elderly, curmudgeonly, much-admired Emperor, in his eighth consulship, and his lively elder son and heir, notching up his sixth). Later, 'suffect' consuls took over, which was a way of sharing the workload and the honours. The suffects that year were Domitian Caesar (the much-less-liked younger son) and an unknown senator called Gnaeus Julius Agricola—a non-notable; some years afterwards he became governor of Britannia. Say no more. He was too insignificant for a civilised province, so the Senate finessed him by pretending that Britain was a challenge where they wanted a man they could trust . . .

I ignore the civic calendar. Still, there are years you remember.

Duty began weighing on me. Death wreaks havoc on survivors' lifestyles. For years I had been forced to play at being the family head, since my father reneged and my only brother was dead. Pa ran away with his redhead when I was about seven—even thirty years ago. My mother never spoke to him again and most of us were loyal to Ma. Even after he returned sheepishly to Rome, calling himself Geminus as a half-hearted disguise, Pa kept apart from the family for years. More recently he did impose himself when it suited him. He was a snob about my connections to a senatorial family, so I had to see most of him. Recently my sister Maia took over his accounts at the auction house, one of my nephews was learning the business, and another sister ran a bar he owned.

Once the twittering slaves made their announcement, I foresaw big changes.

'Who is going to tell me what happened?'

First spokesman was a wine-pourer, not quite as handsome as he thought, who wanted to get himself noticed: 'Marcus Didius, your beloved father was found dead early this morning.'

He had been dead all day and I did not know. I had been struggling with the baby's birth and death and all the while this had been happening too.

'Was it natural?'

'What else could it be, sir?' I could think of a few answers.

Nema, Pa's personal bodyslave, who was known to me, stepped up to give me details. Yesterday, my father came home from work at the Saepta Julia at a normal time, had dinner and retired to bed, early for him. Nema had heard him moving about this morning, apparently at his ablutions, then came a sudden loud thump. Nema ran in and Pa was dead on the floor.

Since I was known to spend my working life questioning such statements, Nema and the others looked worried. I suspected they had discussed how to convince me the story was accurate. They said a slave with some medical knowledge had diagnosed a

heart attack.

‘We did not send for a doctor. You know Geminus. He would loathe the cost, when it was obvious that nothing could be done . . .’

I knew. Pa could be stupidly generous, but like most men who accrued a lot of money he was more often stingy. Anyway, the diagnosis was reasonable. His lifestyle was tough; he had been looking tired; we were all not long returned from a physically demanding trip to Egypt.

Even so, any doubts would bring the slaves under suspicion. Legally, their position was dangerous. If their master’s passing was seen as unnatural, they could all be put to death. They were scared—particularly scared of me. I am an informer. I fix credit checks and character references. I deliver subpoenas, act for disappointed beneficiaries, defend accused parties in civil actions. In the course of this work I frequently run across corpses, not all of them persons who have died quietly of old age at home. So I tend to look for problems. Jealousy, greed and lust have a bad habit of causing people to end up on a bier prematurely. Clients may hire me to investigate the suspicious death of a lover or a business partner.

Sometimes it turns out that my client actually killed the deceased and hired me as a cover, which at least is neat.

‘Shall I fetch the will?’ asked Quirinius, whose main job had been to detain creditors with sweet drinks and pastries on a patio, while Pa scarpered by a back exit.

‘Save it for the heir.’

‘Back in an instant!’

Dear gods.

Me? My father’s heir? On the other hand, who else was there? What friend or close relation, other than me, could Pa have lumbered? He knew half of Rome, but who counted with him enough for this? Had he died intestate, it would have become my role in any case. I had always imagined he *would* die intestate, come to that.

Misgiving gave way to dread. It seemed Pa was going to make me responsible for unravelling the complex rats’ nest of his business affairs. I would have to become familiar with his dubious private life. A named heir does not automatically inherit the estate (though he is entitled to at least a quarter); his duty is to become an extension of the dead man, honouring his gods, coughing up for his charities, preserving property, paying debts (a frequent reason to back out of being an executor, believe me). He makes arrangements for specified bequests and tactfully fends off people who have been disinherited. He shares out the booty as instructed.

I would have to do it all. This was typical of my father. I don’t know why I felt so unprepared.

The will was apparently hard to find. That wasn’t suspicious; Pa hated documentation. He liked to keep everything vague. If he had to have written evidence, he tried to lose the scroll among a lot of mess.

The slaves kept staring. I cleared my throat and gazed at the mosaic floor. When I was bored with counting tesserae, I had to look at them.

They were a mixed bunch. Various nationalities and jobs. Some had worked for Pa for decades, others I failed to recognise. It was unlikely he came by any of them in the

usual way. Not for my father a trip to the slave market when he needed a specific worker, with genteel haggling then a routine purchase. In his world, many business debts were settled by payment in kind. Some executors find antique vases of great value, which have been payments in lieu of fees. But since my father dealt in antique vases anyway, he accepted other commodities. He had acquired a curiously colourful *familia* in this way. Sometimes it worked out well; he had a wonderful panpipe-player, though he himself had a tin ear. But most of the staff looked unimpressive. Bankrupts' cast-offs. Two kitchen staff were blind; that could be entertaining. A gardener had only one arm. I spotted a few vacant expressions, not to mention the usual rheumy eyes, raw wounds and sinister rashes.

While we went on waiting, they plucked up courage to petition me. Very few of these frightened household members were already freedmen; Pa had made lavish promises, but never got around to issuing formal deeds of manumission. That was typical; he managed to screw decent service out of his staff, but preferred to keep them reliant on him. I quickly learned that many of these anxious souls had families, even though slaves are not allowed to marry. They pressed me to grant their freedom, plus the same for various wives and children. Pa did own some of these, so their fates could be untangled and regularised, if I was willing. But others belonged to neighbours, so that was a mess. Other owners would not appreciate me trying to fix up fairytale solutions for *their* handmaids and bootboys.

Another worry for the slaves was where they would all end up. They realised that the villa might have to be sold shortly. They might be heading for the slave-market and a very uncertain future.

While we hung around in embarrassment, surprisingly one of the women asked, 'Would you like to see him now?'

I nearly said *must I?* but that would have been an impiety.

Don't be like that, my boy! Is it too much to show respect to your poor old father?

...

A freedman was guarding the room. A curtain of scent wafted at me from the doorway, cassia and myrrh, traditional funeral incenses, the costly ones. Who authorised that? I hesitated on the threshold then went in.

I had viewed plenty of corpses. That was work. This was duty. I preferred the other kind.

No need to wonder about identity. On a rather fine couch in this dim room off a peaceful corridor, lay my deceased parent: Marcus Didius Favonius, also known as Geminus, descendant of a long line of dubious Aventine plebeians and honoured among the dealers, tricksters and shysters of the Saepta Julia. He had been washed and anointed, dressed in an embroidered tunic and a toga; given a wreath; his eyes had been closed by respectful hands and a ridiculous flower garland positioned round his neck. His haematite seal ring, his other gold ring with the head of an emperor, and the key to his bankbox at the Saepta lay in a small bronze dish, emphasising that the trappings of his life were no longer needed. Lying on his back, laid out so neatly on

two mattresses, that garrulous sociable soul, now permanently silent, seemed thinner but essentially the same as when I saw him last week at our house. Unkempt grey curls warned how my own would be in a decade's time. A lifetime of enjoying meals and doing business over cups of wine showed in his solid belly. Still, he had been a short, wide-bodied man who was used to moving heavy furniture and marble artefacts. His hairy arms and legs were strongly muscled. Down in Rome he often walked, even though he could afford a litter.

This motionless corpse was not my father. Gone were the characteristics that made him: the bright, devious eyes; the raucous, complicated jokes; the endless lust for barmaids; the aptitude for making money out of nothing; those flares of generosity that always led to pleading for reciprocal favours and affection. Gone for ever was what my mother called his cracking grin. No one could more surely clinch a deal. No one enjoyed making a sale so deeply. I had hated having him in my life—but now suddenly could not envisage life without him.

I backed out of the room, feeling queasy.

In the entrance hall Quirinius, flustered, told me, 'I thought I knew where his will was kept, but I've searched high and low and I can't find it.'

'Gone missing?' As a professional habit, I made it sound ominous; not that I cared.

He was relieved. To my surprise, we were being joined by new arrivals; people had come from the city for the funeral. Bemused, I learned that messengers had been sent earlier today to the family and my father's business colleagues. My litter must have crossed with them.

Word must have flown around Rome. Father had belonged to an auctioneers' burial club; mainly he went for the wine. Although he had not paid his subscription for the last six months, the other members seemed to bear no grudges (well, that was Pa). Undertakers had been marshalled. A calm dignitary was in charge.

Gornia, the elderly assistant from the antiques warehouse, was one of the first comers. 'I brought up an altar we had kicking about, young Marcus. Rather nice Etruscan piece, with a winged figure . . .' A benefit of the profession. They could always lay hands on an altar. They had access to most things, and I was just thinking Gornia might help me pick out an urn for the ashes, when one of the funeral club people produced an alabaster item which apparently matched my father's instructions. (What instructions?) The man handed it to me discreetly, brushing aside my murmur about payment. I had the feeling I had blundered into a closed world where everything would be made easy for me today. The debts would come later. Probably not small. I, of course, would be expected to pay them, but I was too sensible to upset myself thinking of that before I had to.

A remarkable crowd gathered. Men I had never seen before claimed to be decades-old colleagues. Squeezing out tears that could almost be genuine, strangers gripped my hand like familiar old uncles and told me what an unexpected tragedy this was. They promised me assistance with unspecified needs. One or two actually winked heavily. I had no idea what they meant.

Family arrived too. With sombre gowns and veiled heads, my sisters—Allia, Galla, Junia—pushed through to the front, dragging with them my nightmare brothers-in-law

and Mico, Victorina's widower. I viewed this as deep hypocrisy. Even Petronius Longus appeared, bringing my youngest sister Maia, who at least had some right to be here because she had worked with Pa. It was Maia who thrust a set of tablets at me.

'You'll need the will.'

'So I am shocked to hear. He kept it at the office?' I was just making conversation. I shoved the thing through my belt.

'This was his latest version!' Maia scoffed. 'Some urgent change had to be made last week so he brought it down to the Saepta. He did love fiddling with it.'

'Know what it says?'

'The misery wouldn't say.'

'Haven't you looked?'

'Don't be shocking—it's sealed with seven seals!'

No time to be amazed by Maia's restraint (if that was true), another marvel happened. A small figure, veiled in blackest black, jumped nimbly off a hired donkey (cheaper than a carrying chair), with the manner of one who expected reverence. She received it. At once the crowd gave way for her, and apparently without surprise at her presence. If the day had seemed unreal before, it became madness now. I didn't need to peek beneath the veil. My mother was taking back her rights.

Luckily no one could see her expression. I knew she would not throw herself inconsolably on the bier, or rend her hair. She would send Pa to the Underworld with a cackle, delighted that he had gone first. She was here to make certain the renegade actually left for the Styx. The smug words I heard through that veil all day were, 'I never like to gloat!'

I saluted Ma gravely and made sure a couple of my sisters led her by the hands, with instructions to ensure that she always had a good view of proceedings and that she didn't pinch any silver trays or old Greek vases from the house. I knew how a son ought to handle his widowed mother. I had advised enough clients on this point.

A procession lined up, like some reptile slowly awakening in the sun. In a daze, I found myself propelled to the front of a long funeral train. We made our way a short distance to an area of the garden that Pa must have already chosen as his resting place. He had planned everything, I gathered. I was fascinated to find he had this morbid streak. His corpse was carried on a bier, on its double mattress, with an ivory headrest. I was one of the eight bearers, with Petronius and the other brothers-in-law—Verontius, the crooked road contractor; Mico the worst plasterer in Rome; Lollius, the constantly unfaithful boatman; Gaius Baebius, the most boring customs clerk in that far from rollicking profession. Numbers were made up by Gornia and a fellow called Clusius, some leading light in auctioneering, probably the one who hoped to scoop up most of my father's business in the next few weeks. There were torches, as is traditional even in daytime. There were horn-players and flautists. Curiously, they all could play. To my relief, there were no hired mourners wailing and, thank Pluto, no mime artists pretending to be Pa.

The undertakers must have brought equipment and, unnoticed, had already constructed a pyre. It was three levels high. Funereal odours soon covered the hillside: not just more myrrh and cassia, but frankincense and cinnamon. No one in Rome would be able to buy banquet garlands today; we had all the flowers. High on the Janiculum, a breeze helped the flames get going after I plunged in the first torch. We