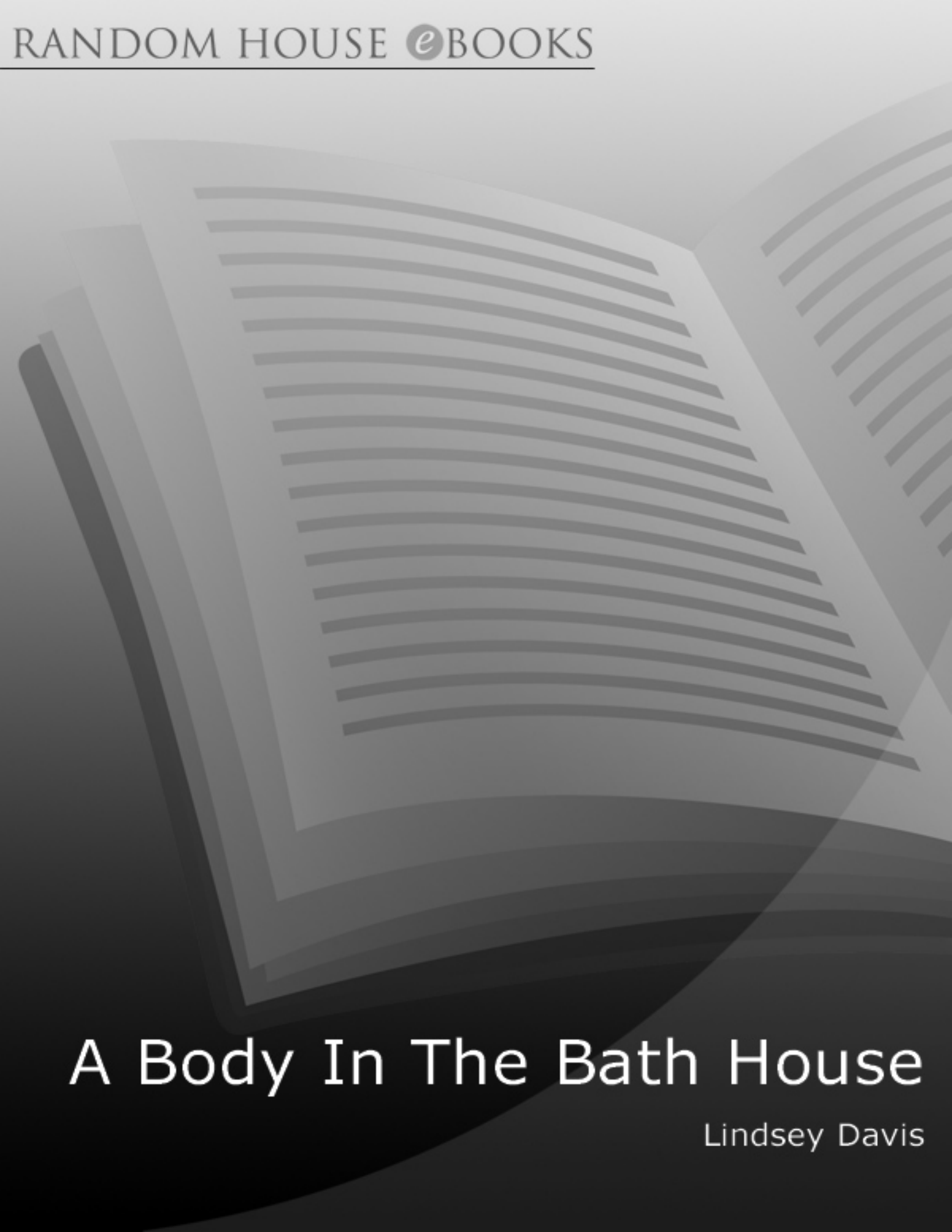


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A Body In The Bath House

Lindsey Davis

A BODY IN THE BATH HOUSE

Lindsey Davis



arrow books

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[Archaeological Note](#)

[Rome and Ostia Spring, AD 75](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

[Britain: Noviomagus Regnensis](#)

[Chapter X](#)

[Chapter XI](#)

[Chapter XII](#)

[Chapter XIII](#)

[Chapter XIV](#)

[Chapter XV](#)

[Chapter XVI](#)

[Chapter XVII](#)
[Chapter XVIII](#)
[Chapter XIX](#)
[Chapter XX](#)
[Chapter XXI](#)
[Chapter XXII](#)
[Chapter XXIII](#)
[Chapter XXIV](#)
[Chapter XXV](#)
[Chapter XXVI](#)
[Chapter XXVII](#)
[Chapter XXVIII](#)
[Chapter XXIX](#)
[Chapter XXX](#)
[Chapter XXXI](#)
[Chapter XXXII](#)
[Chapter XXXIII](#)
[Chapter XXXIV](#)
[Chapter XXXV](#)
[Chapter XXXVI](#)
[Chapter XXXVII](#)
[Chapter XXXVIII](#)
[Chapter XXXIX](#)
[Chapter XL](#)
[Chapter XLI](#)
[Chapter XLII](#)
[Chapter XLIII](#)
[Chapter XLIV](#)
[Chapter XLV](#)

[Chapter XLVI](#)
[Chapter XLVII](#)
[Chapter XLVIII](#)
[Chapter XLIX](#)
[Chapter L](#)
[Chapter LI](#)
[Chapter LII](#)
[Chapter LIII](#)
[Chapter LIV](#)
[Chapter LV](#)
[Chapter LVI](#)
[Chapter LVII](#)
[Chapter LVIII](#)
[Chapter LIX](#)
[Chapter LX](#)

[CV of Marcus Didius Falco](#)

[An Extract from '*The Jupiter Myth*'](#)

[An Extract from *Falco: The Official Companion*](#)

[Breakfast With The Camillus Boys](#)

[Mock Marble Makeovers](#)

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781446457221

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Arrow Books in 2002

7 9 10 8

Copyright © Lindsey Davis 2001

Lindsey Davis has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988 to be identified as the author of this work

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

First Published in Great Britain in 2001 by
Century
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

www.rbooks.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:

www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN 9780099298304

For Richard, again. This one could only be for you. With all
my love

In Rome

M. Didius Falco	an informer with a nose for trouble
Helena Justina	his partner, who can smell a rat
Julia and Favonia	two sweet and perfect babies
Camilla Hyspale	their sour and imperfect nurse
Nux	a dog, who just smells
Pa (Geminus/Favonius)	a rather ripe householder
Maia Favonia	a 'vulnerable' (not very!) widow
Marius, Cloelia, Ancus & Rhea	her nice (sneaky) children
L. Petronius Longus	a loyal friend, annoying Maia
Anacrites	a dangerous spy, following Maia
Perella	a devious dancer, following orders
A. Camillus Aelianus	a high-class apprentice
Q. Camillus Justinus	a bridegroom on the razzle
Gloccus and Cotta	bath-house contractors, in bad odour
Stephanus	a stinking corpse
Vespasian	an Emperor, footing the bill for:

In Britain

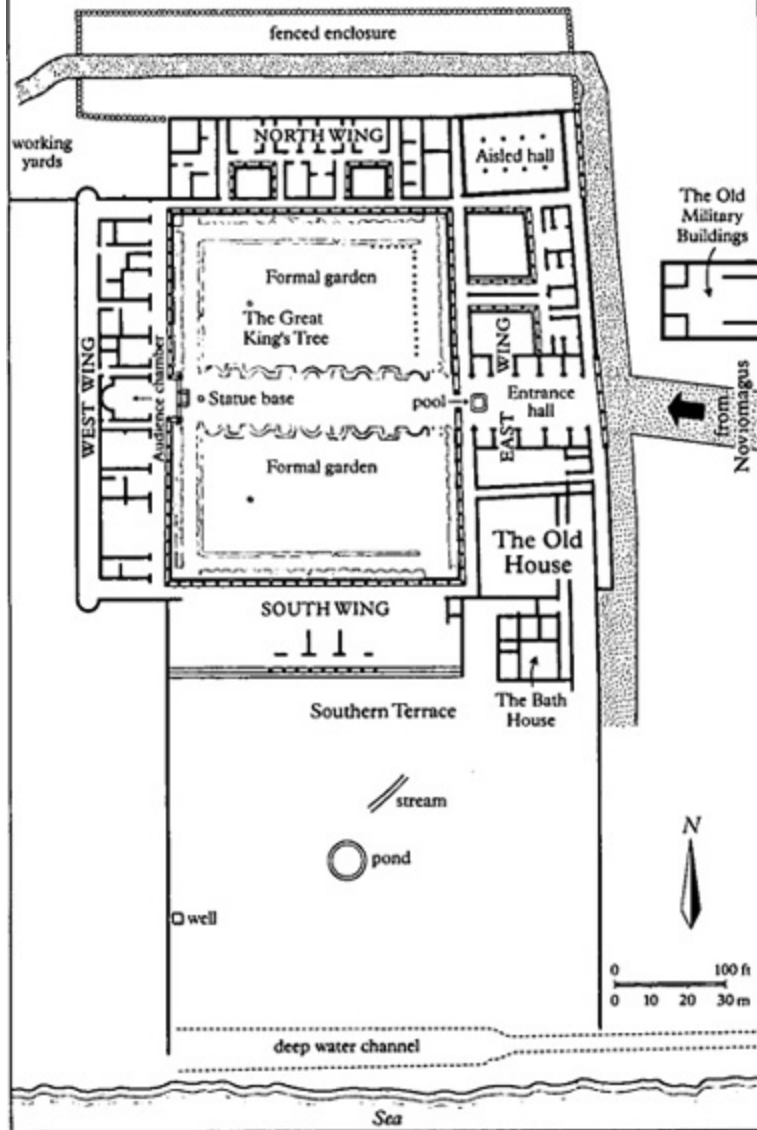
T. Claudius Togidubnus	Great King of the Britons, a makeover fanatic
Verovolcus	a royal facilitator
Marcellinus	a retired designer (with a very nice house)
'Uncle Lobullus'	a contractor, never there
Virginia	a fragrant barmaid

On the New Palace Building Site

Valla, Dubnus, Eporix & Gaudius	more dead men
Pomponius	the project manager (thinks he's in charge)
Magnus	the surveyor (thinks he <i>ought</i> to be in charge)

Cyprianus	the clerk of works (just gets on and runs it)
Plancus & Strephon	junior architects (clones of Pomponius)
Rectus	the farting drainage engineer
Milchato	the hard-edged marble mason
Philocles Senior	the short-tempered mosaicist
Philocles Junior	a clone of his father (misinformed?)
Blandus	a seductive painter, with a bad history
The Smartarse from Stabiae	aiming for a good future
Timagenes	gardening in a harsh landscape
Alexas	a medico who mixes a mean draught
Gaius	a clerk who can count beans
Iggidunus	the sniffy <i>mulsum</i> boy
Alla	a girl who doesn't snivel
Sextius	a mechanical statue-seller, moving in on Maia
Mandumerus	the local labour supervisor (a few restrictive practices)
Lupus	the overseas labour supervisor (more dodgy customs)
Tiberius & Septimus	the universal labourers

Plan of the Roman Palace at Fishbourne, as redeveloped in AD75-80



Archaeological Note

The remains of the Roman Palace at Fishbourne, near Chichester on the south coast of Britain, were unearthed by a mechanical digger during the construction of a watermain in 1960. It seemed hard to believe that a Roman building of such wealth and importance *could* be found here. Some of the palace lies under modern houses, but the excavation and preservation of what was accessible owes everything to local volunteers and benefactors. It is still a matter of speculation why such a magnificent building was created in this unlikely place.

If Fishbourne had a Roman name, we don't know it. The palace of Togidubnus (as we now call him), Great King of the Britons, was constructed in various phases. In this novel the Neronian 'protopalace' is called 'the old house'; it is the grand Flavian expansion that Falco sees at building site stage. I have tried to use only what we know from excavation. Any mistakes are my responsibility and if future work reveals new treasures or leads to new interpretations, we shall just have to say 'they changed the design after Falco saw the plans'.

There were various Roman villas in a similar style along the coast; these were probably homes to local dignitaries, perhaps relatives of the King. That the one at Angmering was built by an architect is my own invention.

This is the first time I have based a story entirely on one archaeological site, and I am enormously grateful to everyone at Fishbourne, especially David Rudkin the then curator, for welcoming the prospect so cheerfully. The palace belongs to Sussex Archaeological Society. It has a museum and other facilities and is a highly recommended site to visit.

ROME AND OSTIA
SPRING, AD 75

I

But for Rhea Favonia, we might have lived with it.

'There's a smell! There's a horrible smell. I'm not going in there!'

I didn't need to be an informer to know we were stuck. When a four-year-old girl reckons she has detected something nasty, you just give in and look for it. My little niece would not go near the bath house until we proved there was nothing horrible in the caldarium. The more we scoffed and told her the hot room was only smelly because of its new plaster, the more Rhea screamed hysterically at bath time. There was nothing visible, and the rest of us tried to ignore it. But the child's insistence unsettled everyone.

There *was* a faint odour. If I tried sniffing it out, I lost it. When I decided there had been nothing, straight away I smelled it again.

At least Helena and I were able to go home to our own new house. My sister Maia and her children had to stay on there on the Janiculum Hill, in the home that was supposed to be their refuge from trouble, living with that other kind of trouble, Pa. My father, Geminus, and I were in the throes of a house-swap. While I tried to organise decorators to renovate his faded old lair on the bank of the Tiber, he took over the spread on which I had already worked for months, where all that remained for completion was the new bath house.

The Janiculum house had a highly desirable location - if you worked on the north side of Rome. It suited Pa, with his auction house and antiques business in the Saepta Julia by

the Pantheon. My own work required free access to all parts of the city. I was an informer, serving private clients whose cases could take me anywhere. However much I wanted to move out and across the river, I needed to live close to the action. Sadly, this sensible thought had only struck Helena and me after we had bought the new house.

By chance, father's long-term companion, Flora, then died. He turned into a maudlin romantic, who hated the mansion they had shared. I had always liked the riverside quarter below the Aventine. So we organised an exchange. The bath house contractors became Father's problem. That was appropriate because Pa had introduced them to Helena in the first place. I enjoyed waiting to see how he would persuade Gloccus and Cotta to finish, a task where even Helena had failed - despite the fact she had been paying their bills. As with all builders, the more unreliable they had become, the more extortionate those bills were.

With Pa, we couldn't win: by some means, he fixed them. Within a week, Gloccus and Cotta had grouted their last wobbly tile and cleared off. My father then possessed a fine domestic outbuilding with a full cold room, tepid room, three-piece sweating-room suite; natty dipping pool; integral changing area with modish pegs and clothes bunkers; separate furnace and log store; de luxe Greek marble basins and a custom-designed sea-god medallion in one newly laid mosaic floor. But while people were admiring his Neptune, they also noticed the odd smell.

In moments when it caught me, that reek seemed to carry hints of decay. Pa knew it too. 'It's as if the room had been locked up with some old codger dead inside for months.'

'Well, the room's brand new and the old cove is still alive, unfortunately.' I gathered Pa must have had some neglected neighbours, in the past life we never discussed. I myself knew about smells like that from other situations. Bad ones.

There came an evening, after a long hot day, when we found we could no longer ignore the stink. That afternoon I had been helping Pa dig over a terrace, Jupiter knows why. He could afford gardeners and I was not one to play the dutiful son. Afterwards, we both sluiced off. It must have been the first time we bathed together since he ran away when I was seven. Next time we met, I was home from the army. For a few years I even pretended not to know who he was. Now I had to tolerate occasional brushes with the old rogue, for social reasons. He was older; he was on his own with that, but I was older too. I now had two baby daughters. I should allow them a chance to learn to despise their grandfather.

As we stood in the hot room that evening, we faced decision time. During the day, I had done most of the heavy work. I was exhausted, yet I still rejected Pa's offer to scrape a strigil down my back. I made a rough job of cleaning off the oil myself. Pa favoured a concoction of what seemed to be crushed iris roots. Incongruous. And on that hot sultry night, nowhere near strong enough to mask the other smell.

'Rhea's right.' I glanced down at the floor. 'Something's rotting in your hypocaust.'

'No, no; trust me!' Pa used the voice he kept for assuring idiots that some piece of Campanian fakery could be 'school of Lysippus', if looked at in the right light. 'I told Gloccus to omit the hypocaust from this room. His quotation was outrageous for underfloor work. I worked out some figures myself, and with that kind of area to heat, I was going to be spending four times as much on fuel . . .' He tapered off.

I eased my foot against the wide instep strap of a bath shoe. Helena's original scheme had involved properly heating the whole warm suite. Once she admitted what she was up to here, I had seen the plans. 'What have you done then?'

'Just wall flues.'

'You'll regret it, you cheapskate. You're on high ground. You'll find it chilly round your rude bits in December.'

'Give over. I work right by the Baths of Agrippa.' Entrance was free. Pa would love that. 'I won't need to use this place except in high summer.'

I stretched slowly, trying to ease the stiffness in my lower back. 'Is the floor solid? Or had they already dug out a hypocaust when you decided against it?'

'Well, the lads had made a start. I told them to floor over the cavity and block off any links to the other rooms.'

'Brilliant, Pa. So there won't be an access point for crawling under this floor.'

'No. The only way in is down.'

Nice work. We would have to break up the mosaic we had only just taken over brand new.

The underfloor space in a usable hypocaust would be eighteen inches high, or two feet at most, with a mass of tile piers to support the suspended floor. It would be dark and hot. Normally they send boys in to clean them, not that I would inflict it on a child today - to face who knew what? I was relieved there was no formal access hatch. That saved me having to crawl in.

'So what do you think about this smell, Marcus?' my father asked, far too deferentially.

'The same as you. Your Neptune is floating on rot. And it's not going away.'

Instinctively we breathed. We caught a definite hum.

'Oh Titan's turds.'

'That's what it smells like, Pa!'

We ordered the furnace slave to stop stoking. We told him to go to the house and keep everyone else indoors. I fetched pickaxes and crowbars, then Pa and I set about ruining the sea-god mosaic.

It had cost a fortune but Gloccus and Cotta had produced their usual shoddy work. The suspended foundation for the tesserae was far too shallow. Neptune, with his wild seaweed hair and boggle-eyed attendant squids, would soon have been buckling underfoot.

By tapping with a chisel, I identified a hollow area and we set to. My father got the worst of it. Always impetuous, he put his pick in too fast, hit something, and was splattered with foul yellowish liquid. He let out a yell of disgust. I leapt back and stopped breathing. A warm updraft brought disgusting odours; we fled towards the door. Judging by its powerful airflow, the underfloor system must never have been blocked off completely as Pa ordered. We were now in no doubt what must be down there.

‘Oh pigshit!’ Pa peeled off his tunic and hurled it into a corner, splashing water on his skin where the stinking liquid had touched him. He was hopping with disgust. ‘Oh pigshit, pigshit, pigshit!’

‘Didius Favonius speaks. Come, citizens of Rome, let us gather to admire the elegance of his oratory –’ I was trying to put off the moment when we had to go back for a look.

‘Shut your lofty gob, Marcus! It’s putrid – and it bloody well missed you!’

‘Come on; let’s get this over with.’

We covered our mouths and braved a look. In a depression that must have been used as the lazy workmen’s cache for rubbish, amongst a mass of uncleared site rubble, we had unearthed a stomach-turning relic. Still just recognisably human, it was a half-decayed corpse.

II

It had already been a hard winter. For most of it, Helena Justina had been pregnant with our second child. She suffered more than with the first, while I struggled to let her rest by looking after our firstborn, Julia. As queen of the household, Julia was establishing her authority that year. I had the bruises to prove it. I had gone deaf too; she enjoyed testing her lungs. Our dark-haired moppet could put on a burst of speed any stadium sprinter would envy, especially as she toddled towards a fiercely steaming stockpot or darted down our steps onto the roadway. Even dumping her on female relations was out; her favourite game lately was breaking vases.

Spring saw no domestic improvements. First the new baby was born. It was very quick. Just as well. Both grandmothers were on the spot this time to complicate proceedings. Ma and the senator's wife were full of wise ideas, though they had opposing views on midwifery. Things were frosty enough, then I managed to be rude to both of them. At least that gave them a subject on which they could agree.

The new mite was ailing and I named her in a hurry: Sosia Favonia. In part, it was a nod to my father, whose original cognomen was Favonius. I would never have demeaned myself paying him a compliment if I had thought my daughter would survive. Born skinny and silent, she had looked halfway to Hades. The minute I named her, she rallied. From then on she was as tough as a totter's ferret. She also had her own character from the start, a curious little eccentric who never quite seemed to belong with us.

But everyone told me she had to be mine: she made so much mess and noise.

It took at least six weeks before my family's fury at the name I had chosen died down to simmering sneers that would only be revived on Favonia's birthday and at family gatherings every Saturnalia, and whenever there was nobody to blame for anything else. People were now nagging me to acquire a children's nurse. It was nobody's business but Helena's and mine, so everyone weighed in. Eventually I gave up and visited a slave market.

Judging by the pitiful specimens on offer, Rome badly needed some frontier wars. The slave trade was in a slump. The dealer I approached was a creased Delian in a dirty robe, picking his nails on a lop-sided tripod while he waited for some naïve duffer with a poor eye and a fat purse. He got me. He tried the patter anyway.

Since Vespasian was rebuilding the Empire, he needed to mint coinage and had raided the slave markets for labourers to put in the gold and silver mines. Titus brought large numbers of Jewish prisoners to Rome after the siege of Jerusalem, but the public service had snapped up the men to build the Flavian Amphitheatre. Who knows where the women ended up. That left a poor display for me. In the dealer's current batch were a few elderly oriental secretary types, long past being able to see to read a scroll. Then there were various lumps suitable for farm labouring. I did need a manager for my farm at Tibur, but that would wait. My mother had taught me how to go to market. I won't say I was scared of Ma, but I had learned to trot home with what was on the shopping list and no private treats for myself.

'Jupiter. Where do people buy disease-raddled flute girls nowadays?' I had reached the bitter, sarcastic stage. 'How come there are no toothless grannies that according to you can dance naked on the table while weaving a side-weave tunic and grinding a modius of wheat?'

'Females tend to be snapped up, tribune . . .' The dealer winked. I was too careworn to respond. 'I can do you a Christian, if you want to stretch a point.'

'No thanks. They drink their god's blood while they maunder about love, don't they?' My late brother Festus had encountered these crazy men out in Judaea and sent home some lurid tales. 'I'm looking for a children's nurse; I cannot have perverts.'

'No, no; I believe they drink wine -'

'Forget it. I don't want a drunk. My darling heirs can pick up bad habits watching me.'

'These Christians just pray and cry a lot, or try to convert the master and mistress of the house to their beliefs -'

'You want to get me arrested because some arrogant slave says everyone should deny the sanctity of the Emperor? Vespasian may be a grouchy old barbarian-basher with a tight-arsed Sabine outlook - but I work for him sometimes. When he pays up, I'm happy to say he's a god.'

'How about a bonny Briton, then?'

He proffered a thin, pale-haired girl of about fifteen, wilting under her shame as the filthy trader poked her rags aside to reveal her figure. As tribal maidens go, she was far from buxom. He tried to make her show her teeth and I would have taken her if she had bitten him, but she just leaned away. Too meek to be trusted. Feed her and clothe her and the next we knew, she'd be stealing Helena's tunics and throwing the baby on its head. The man assured me she was healthy, a good breeder, and had no claims at law hanging onto her. 'Very popular, Britons,' he said, leering.

'Why's that?'

'Dirt cheap. Then your wife won't worry about you chasing this pitiful thing around the kitchen the way she would with some ogling Syrian who knows it all.'

I shuddered. 'I do have some standards. Does your British girl know Latin?'

'You are joking, tribune.'

'No good, then. Look, I want a clean woman with experience of headstrong children, who would fit in with a young, upwardly moving family -'

'You've got expensive taste!' His eye fell on my new gold equestrian ring. It told him my financial position exactly; his disgust was open. 'We do a basic model with no trimmings. Lots of potential, but you have to train the bint yourself . . . You can win them over with kind treatment, you know. Ends up they would die for you.'

'What - and land me with the funeral costs?'

'Stuff you, then!'

So we all knew where we were.

I went home without a slave. It did not matter. The noble Julia Justa, Helena's mother, had the bright idea of giving us the daughter of Helena's own old nurse. Camilla Hyspale was thirty years old and newly given her liberty. Her freedwoman status would overcome any squeamishness I felt about owning slaves (though I would have to do it; I was middle class now, and obliged to show my clout). There was a downside. I reckoned we had about six months before Hyspale wanted to exploit her new citizenship and marry. She would fall for some limp waste of space; she had him lined up already, I bet. Then I would feel responsible for him too . . .

Hyspale had not approved when Helena Justina abandoned her smart senatorial home to live with an informer. She came to us with great reluctance. It was made clear at our first interview (*she* interviewed us, of course) that Hyspale expected a room of her own in a respectable dwelling, the right to more time off than time on duty, use of the family carrying chair to protect her modesty on shopping trips and the occasional treat of a ticket for the theatre, or better still a pair of tickets so she could go with a friend. She would not accept being quizzed on the sex or identity of the friend.

A slave or freedwoman soon rules your life. To satisfy Hypsale's need for social standing, dear gods, I had to buy a carrying chair. Pa lent me a couple of bearers temporarily; this was just his excuse to use *my* chair to transport *his* property to his new home on the Janiculum. To give Hypsale her room, we had to move in before Pa's old house was ready for us. For weeks we lived alongside our decorators, which would have been bad enough even if I had not been lured into giving work to my brother-in-law, Mico the plasterer. He was thrilled. Since he was working for a relative, he assumed he could bring his motherless brats with him - and that our nursemaid would look after them. At least that way I got back at the nurse. Mico had been married to my most terrible sister; Victorina's character was showing up well in her orphans. It was a rude shock for Hypsale, who kept rushing over to the Capena Gate to complain about her horrid life to Helena's parents. The senator reproached me with her stories every time I met him at the gym we shared.

'Why in Hades did she come to us?' I grumbled. 'She must have had some inkling what it would be like.'

'The girl is very fond of my daughter,' suggested Camillus Verus loyally. 'Besides, I'm told she believed you would provide the opportunity for travel and adventure in exotic foreign provinces.'

I told the excellent Camillus which ghastly province I had just been invited to visit and we had a good laugh.

Julius Frontinus, an ex-consul I had met during an investigation in Rome two years ago, was now suffering his reward for a blameless reputation: Vespasian had made him the governor of Britain. On arrival, Frontinus had discovered some problem with his major works programme, and he suggested I was the man to sort it. He wanted me to go out there. But my life was hard enough. I had already written and turned down his request for help.

III

The niggle from Julius Frontinus had refused to go away. Next, I was summoned to a light afternoon chat with the Emperor. I knew that meant some heavy request.

Vespasian, who had domestic problems of his own, now lurked frequently in the Gardens of Sallust. This helped him to avoid petitioners at the Palace - and to dodge his sons too. Domitian was often at odds with his father and brother, probably thinking that they ganged up against him. (The Flavians were a close family but Domitian Caesar was a squit, so who could blame them?) The elder and favourite son, Titus, acted as his father's political colleague. Once a wonderboy, he had now imported Berenice, the Queen of Judaea, with whom he was openly conducting a passionate love affair. She was beautiful, brave and brazen - and thus hugely unpopular. It must have caused a few spats over breakfast. Anyway, Berenice was a shameless piece of goods who had already tried making eyes at Vespasian during the Jewish War. Now that his mistress of many years, Antonia Caenis, had recently died, he may have felt vulnerable. Even if he could resist Berenice, seeing his virile son indulging her may have been unwelcome. At the Palace Titus also had a young daughter who by all accounts was growing up a handful. Lack of discipline, my mother said. Having brought up Victorina, Allia, Galla, Junia and Maia - every one a trainee Fury - she should know.

Vespasian notoriously distrusted informers, but with that kind of private life interviewing me may have seemed a peaceful change. I would have welcomed it too - intelligent chat with a self-made, forthright individualist - had I not been afraid he would offer me a bum task.

*

The Gardens of Sallust lie in the northern reaches of the city, a long, hot hike away from my area. They occupy a generous site on both sides of the valley between the Pincian and Quirinal Hills. I believe Vespasian had owned a private house out there, before he became Emperor. The Via Salaria, still his route home to his summer estates in the Sabine Hills, runs out that way too.

Whoever Sallust was, his pleasure park had been imperial property for several generations. Mad Caligula had built an Egyptian pavilion, packed with pink granite statues, to commemorate one of his incestuous sisters. More popularly, Augustus displayed some giants' bones in a museum. Emperors have more than a clipped bay tree and a row of beans. Here some of the best statues I had seen in the open air marked the end of elegant vistas. As I searched for the old man, I strolled under the cool, calming shade of graceful cypresses, eyed up by basking doves who knew exactly how cute they were.

Eventually I detected various shy Praetorians lurking in the shrubberies; Vespasian had taken a public stand against being protected from madmen with daggers - which meant his Guards had to hang around here trying to look like gardeners weeding, instead of stamping about like bullies, as they preferred. Some had given up pretending. They were sprawled on the ground playing board games in the dust, occasionally breaking off to gulp from what I gently presumed were water flasks.

They had managed to corral their charge into a nook where it seemed unlikely any deranged obsessive with a legal grievance could burst through the thick hedge. Vespasian had piled up his voluminous purple drapes and his wreath on a dusty urn; he did not care how many snobs he offended with his informality. As he sat working in his gilded tunic, the Guards had a fairly clear view of his open-

air office. If any high-minded armed opponent did rush past them, there was a massive Dying Niobid, desperately attempting to pluck out her fatal arrow, at whose white marble feet the Emperor might expire very tastefully.

The Praetorians tried to rouse themselves to treat me as a suspicious character, but they knew my name was on an appointment scroll. I waved my invitation. I was not in the mood for idiots with shiny javelins and no manners. Seeing the official seal, they allowed me through, making the gesture as offensive as possible.

'Thanks, boys!' I saved my patronising grin until I had marched into the safety of Vespasian's line of vision. He was seated on a plain stone bench in the shade while an elderly slave handed him tablets and scrolls.

The official name-caller was still flustering over my details when the Emperor broke in and called out, 'It's Falco!' He was a big, blunt sixty-year-old who had worked up from nothing and he despised ceremonial.

The boy's job was to save his élite master from any perceived rudeness if he forgot eminent people. Trapped in routine, the child whispered, '*Falco, sir!*' Vespasian, who could show kindness to minions (though he never showed it to me), nodded patiently. Then I was free to go forward and exchange pleasantries with the lord of the known world.

This was no exquisite little Claudian, looking down his thin nose on the coinage like a self-satisfied Greek god. He was bald, tanned, his face full of character and heavily lined after years of squinting across deserts for rebellious tribes. Pale laughter seams ran at the corners of his eyes too, after decades of despising fools and honestly mocking himself. Vespasian was rooted in country stock like a true Roman (as I was myself on my mother's side). Over the years he had taken on all the snide establishment detractors; shamelessly grappled for high-level associates; craftily

chosen long-term winners rather than temporary flash boys; doggedly made the best out of every career opportunity; then seized the throne so his accession seemed both amazing and inevitable at the same time.

The great one saluted me with his customary care for my welfare: 'I hope you're not going to say I owe you money.'

I expressed my own respect for his rank. 'Would there be any point, Caesar?'

'Glad I've set you at your ease!' He liked to joke. As Emperor, he must have felt inhibited with most people. For some reason I fell into a separate category. 'So what have you been up to, Falco?'

'Dibbling and dabbling.' I had been trying to expand my business, using Helena's two younger brothers. Neither possessed any informing talent. I intended to use them to lend tone, with a view to wooing more sophisticated (richer) clients: every businessman's hopeless dream. It was best not to mention to Vespasian that these two lads who ought to be donning white robes as candidates for the Curia were instead lowering themselves to work with me. 'I am enjoying my new rank,' I said, beaming, which was as close as I would let myself come to thanking him for promoting me.

'I hear you make a good poultry keeper.' Elevation to the equestrian stratum had brought tiresome responsibilities. I was Procurator of the Sacred Geese of the Temple of Juno, with additional oversight of the augurs' chickens.

'Country background.' He looked surprised. I was stretching it, but Ma's family came from the Campagna. 'The prophetic fowl get pesty if you don't watch them, but Juno's geese are in fine fettle.'

Helena and I had plenty of down-stuffed cushions in our new home too. I had grasped equestrianism rapidly.

'How is that girl you kidnapped?' Had the disapproving old devil read my thoughts?

'Devoted to the domestic duties of a modest Roman matron - well, I can't get her to weave wool traditionally, though she did commandeer the house keys and she is nursing children. Helena Justina has just done me the honour of becoming mother to my second child.' I knew better than to expect a silver birth-gift from this skinflint.

'Boy or girl?' Helena would have liked the even-handed way he offered both possibilities.

'Another daughter, sir. Sosia Favonia.' Would it strike Vespasian that she was partly named after a relative of Helena's? A dear bright young girl called Sosia, who had been murdered as a consequence of the first mission I undertook for him - murdered by his son Domitian, though of course we never mentioned that.

'Charming.' If his eyes hardened briefly, it was impossible to detect. 'My congratulations to your -'

'Wife,' I said firmly. Vespasian glowered. Helena was a senator's daughter and should be married to a senator. Her intelligence, her money, and her child-bearing ability ought to be at the disposal of the halfwits in the 'best' families. I pretended to see his point. 'Of course I explain to Helena Justina continually that the cheap appeal of an exciting life with me should not draw her from her inherited role as a member of patrician society - but what can I do? The poor girl is besotted and refuses to leave me. Her pleas when I threaten to send her back to her noble father are heart-rending -'

'That's enough, Falco!'

'Caesar.'

He flung a stylus aside. Watchful secretaries slid forward and collected a pile of waxed tablets in case he dashed them to the ground. Vespasian, however, was not that kind of spoiled hero. He had once had to budget cautiously; he knew the price of tablet wax.

'Well, I may want to put space between you two temporarily.'

'Ah. Anything to do with Julius Frontinus and the Isles of Mystery?' I pre-empted him.

The Emperor scowled. 'He's a good man. And he's known to you.'

'I think highly of Frontinus.'

Vespasian ignored the chance to flatter me with the provincial governor's opinion of me. 'There's nothing wrong with Britain.'

'Well, you know I know that, sir.' Like all subordinates, I hoped my commander-in-chief remembered my entire personal history. Like most generals, Vespasian forgot even episodes he had been involved with - but given time, he would recall that he himself had sent me to Britain four years ago. 'That is,' I said dryly, 'if you leave out the weather, the total lack of infrastructure, the women, the *men*, the food, the drink and the mammoth travelling distance from one's dear Roman heritage!'

'Can't lure you with some boar hunting?'

'Not my style.' Even if it had been, the Empire was packed with more thrilling places to chase wildlife across ghastly terrain. Most of the other places were sunny and had cities. 'Nor do I cherish a visionary wish to implant civilisation among the awe-struck British tribes.'

Vespasian grinned. 'Oh I've despatched a bunch of lawyers and philosophers to do that.'

'I know, sir. They hadn't achieved much the last time you sent me north.' I had plenty more to say about Britain. 'As I recall, the pasty-faced tribes had still not learned what to do with the sponge on the stick at public latrines. Where anybody had yet built any latrines.' Goose-pimples ran across my arm. Without intending it, I added, 'I was there during the Rebellion. That should be enough for anyone.'

Vespasian shifted slightly on the bench. The Rebellion was down to Nero, but it still made all Romans shudder. 'Well, somebody has to go, Falco.'

I said nothing.

He tried frankness. 'There is a monumental cock-up on a rather public project.'

'Yes, sir. Frontinus let me into his confidence.'

'Can't be worse than the troubles you sorted in the silver mines.' So he did remember sending me to Britain previously. 'A quick dash over there; audit the slapdash buggers; nail any frauds; then straight home. For you, it's a snip, Falco.'

'Should be a snip for anyone then, Caesar; I'm no demigod. Why don't you send Anacrites?' I suggested nastily. I always liked to think Vespasian reined in the Chief Spy because he distrusted the man's abilities. 'I am desolate to disappoint you, Caesar, though honoured by your faith in me—'

'Don't blather. So you won't go?' sneered Vespasian.

'New baby,' I offered as a let-out for both of us.

'Just the time to nip off.'

'Regrettably, Helena Justina has a pact with me that if ever I travel, she comes too.'

'Doesn't trust you?' he scoffed, clearly thinking that was probable.

'She trusts me absolutely, sir. Our pact is, that she is always present to supervise!'

Vespasian, who had met Helena in one of her fighting moods, decided to back off. He asked me at least to think about the job. I said I would. We both knew that was a lie.