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The Tiberius Torture

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The Tiberius Torture

A Novel

A Thesis

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1

I looked up from the essay I was grading and saw Duncan's tan, leathery face peeking in through my doorway. His dyed eyebrows were jacked up high, questioning, and his bleached teeth were gleaming. "Hey-ay Joe," he sang to the rhythm of the Hendrix song, "How did your mee-ting go?" People have been singing that song to me since I was in middle school and started going by Joe instead of Joseph. I never should have switched; but once you do it, it's hard to go back.

I gave him a look, and he came inside the cramped little box the university calls my office and sat in an old chair my students use when they come to my office hours.

"So," he said. "Was it bad, terrible, or apocalyptic?"

"Terrible," I said.

Duncan creaked forward in the chair. "You still have a chance then?"

"Not really," I said. "A ghost of a chance, maybe."

"Ghosts are real," he said dramatically. "All historians know that." This was a typical Duncanism. He promoted his classes with titles like, *Corpses Whispering: Burial Practices in Medieval Eastern Europe*, and *Istanbul Past & Present: A Ghost Tour*.

"Sure," I said, "the past lives in our classes, but I don't think I'm going to be teaching those much longer. Not here, anyway."

Duncan leaned back, frowning. "What exactly did she say?"

The meeting, I told him, had started the same way my last review had. Rajvi, the chair of our department, had said in a Miranda Rights tone: "In order to grant tenure to prospective candidates in the History Department, the University requires at least one book and several peer-reviewed articles that significantly advance the scholarship of the candidate's area of study – "

Duncan shook his head. "Everyone in the department knows that. Did she say it just to take a dig at you?"

I shrugged. "She had a checklist in front of her. I think she wants to make sure that she fires me by the book. No pun intended."

He smiled, showing his big white teeth. "She was just covering her ass. I don't think she wants to fire you. Did she give you any wiggle room?"

"She gave me an ultimatum. She said that given where I am right now, it would be impossible to expect me to complete my book by the beginning of the fall term, when I have to submit it as part of my tenure package."

Duncan scratched his scalp under his thin, dyed hair. "You've got most of the summer. Could you expand on that Vesuvius article? Is there enough there to make a book out of?"

"No," I said.

"I don't mean a *good* book," he said. "I'm talking about a very thin, really shitty one."

I shook my head. "I need a lot more time to research, and I have to get lucky – you know how it is – I have to discover something decent enough to get me the publishing contract."

It was true; I'd been trying for months to build on the last article I'd published, which argued that Mount Vesuvius' eruption in 79 CE had crippled Italian wine production for over a decade. I suspected, though, that the eruption had done much more, that when Vesuvius obliterated Italy's most innovative ancient vineyards, it had set back winemaking throughout the

entire Mediterranean for generations. But I was having trouble finding enough supporting evidence to take my thesis beyond mere speculation. I had little nuggets of evidence here and there, but not even close to enough for a long scholarly work. And, I have to admit that I hadn't been researching as energetically as I should have been, given my precarious academic position. Maybe I was scared that if I kept digging, I'd find out that I was wrong – that Vesuvius hadn't really had the grand, far-reaching effect on wine that I wanted it to have had.

When I voiced this, Duncan said, "I hear ya, there are no guarantees with that, or any other line of research. You might crash and burn. But, if you do find some enticing bit of research to support the creation of your great scholarly opus, what then? Rajvi will try to buy you another year to actually write the thing?"

"That's the idea," I said. "If I can get a book contract by the end of the summer, she may be able to push my tenure package through on the promise that I'll follow through next year."

Duncan looked skeptical. "What publisher?"

"Berkeley Press," I said.

He made a face. "Peggy Talbot?"

"I don't have any other options," I said. "She's the only editor I have any connection to."

He looked up at the ceiling, thinking. Then he said, "All the editors I know are on the Medieval side of things, or Renaissance. Does Rajvi know anyone she could put you in contact with?"

"I think she would have said."

Duncan sighed. "I just hate to see you go down that road again – "

"I don't have a lot of options," I said. "And Peggy's open to seeing a book proposal sometime soon, probably August."

"OK," Duncan said. "You and Peggy together, on a hot August night."

"It's not a date."

"Cheer up," Duncan said, smiling. "The meeting could have been worse. Rajvi must have really gone to bat for you with the dean to give you this chance. I didn't think she liked you that much."

"She doesn't," I said. "She probably only gave me this so-called chance so she won't feel so guilty when she actually does fire me in the fall. I've only got a couple months to do something she knows takes *years*, even with luck."

Duncan bobbed his head to the side. "OK, so it's not a great chance, but it's something. Let's celebrate."

I tapped the pile of students' bluebooks on my desk. "I have to finish grading these."

"Do 'em tomorrow," he said, springing up from his chair. "Tonight, we're going to drink, we're going to barbecue, and we're going to make *battle plans*."

We drove the forty-five minutes from the University up to Duncan's house in Los Olivos, up in the wine country. It's a cute little town where they filmed some scenes from the movie *Sideways*.

Duncan's ranch-style house is sprawling but is filled with so much clutter that it feels less lonely than I think it would otherwise. Duncan, like a lot of professors, has stuffed his place with enough books to fill a library. He plays the oboe, too, and has old wooden oboe-precursors hung all over the walls. But his maps – those are the things that make his house such fun to wander around. Most are from the medieval period – Duncan is a medievalist; but my favorite is a moth-eaten tapestry-map of Istanbul, intricately woven with bright green and gold thread during the

time of Suleiman the Magnificent. (I love his name. Alexander was "great" – so were Pompey and Constantine. But Suleiman was fucking *magnificent*.) Duncan says he bought the tapestry-map in Turkey in 1972 for a hundred fifty dollars, but who knows what it'd be worth if he tried to sell it now.

Duncan's kitchen looks like it was last remodeled about the same year he bought the map, with dark wooden cabinets and yellow Formica countertops. There was a bottle of wine sitting there when we walked in; Duncan had opened it that morning and covered it with cheesecloth to let it breath. He enjoys wine almost to a fault, like a lot of people in the Santa Barbara area.

Wine might, in fact, be one of the main reasons I got hired at UCSB. My dissertation was titled *Lifeblood of the Empire: Roman Wine in Ritual and Commerce*. It was dull but got me a campus interview. The professors who interviewed me seemed to find wine interesting at the time I was hired – this wasn't too long after *Sideways* came out – and they hoped, I think, that I'd write at least one or two "significant" books based on my dissertation; but it all came to nothing. Worse than nothing, actually.

They picked up the wine and poured it into the glasses Duncan had set out next to the Glucosamine, Centrum Silver, and ten or twelve other supplements he thought helped him keep the stream of young women coming and going through his door. The wine was dark red, with almost an oily look to it. It was an unusual local blend of Syrah and Sangiovese – one of my favorites.

I brought our glasses out to the patio where Duncan was standing, forking a couple of steaks onto the grill. After he shut the grill cover, he picked up his glass and clinked mine with it. "To King Pelias' command," he said. He was making one of his history jokes. King Pelias

commands Jason to go after the Golden Fleece, believing it to be a hopeless and deadly quest, but of course Jason succeeds. This was Duncan's quirky way of wishing me well, which I appreciated.

While our steaks cooked, we hashed out the battle plan. I'd go back to Rome, where I hadn't been in three years. The archives there – the state run ones, anyway – are badly unorganized and are in horrible condition, but there are mountains of records, and they go back centuries. It's a potential gold mine, but fraught with peril. Many an intrepid scholar has ventured into the bowels of the archives and returned, years later, hollow-eyed and empty-handed.

In order to give me courage in the face of this nearly impossible situation, Duncan proposed a sort of ritual: that we do the impossible. Or, what was considered impossible for all of history up until a hundred years ago, anyway. We would fly.

He wanted to go hang gliding. He seriously did. And I said, hell no, I'm not the daredevil type. (I wasn't being modest.) But by the time we'd uncorked our third bottle, I said yes.

*

We got up early the next morning, dumped strong coffee into our sour stomachs – at least mine was sour; Duncan didn't seem as hung-over as I was – and drove three and a half hours up to Hollister, where there was what hang gliding enthusiasts call the Bunny Hill.

It looks pretty much like it sounds: it's a hill with a gradual slope where you practice the basics of hang gliding before you go off and do really spectacular things like jumping off cliffs and soaring around like a hawk.

A big woman named Mac, who told us she'd grown up hang gliding in her native Hawaii, was our instructor. She showed us how to put our gliders together, and described the mechanics of how they work and what we were supposed to do up there on the Bunny Hill. The breakdown was this: we were going to take turns running down the slope and the wind would pick us up, gently taking us up about ten feet into the air. After a short ride, we would practice landing.

Landing, she said, was as simple as coming down on your feet and running until you could slow down and stop – all the while holding the heavy glider on your shoulders, with your hands on that triangle thing, which is your steering wheel of sorts. On beginners' gliders, the triangle also has training wheels on bottom, so in case you fall forward, the two hard plastic wheels roll you along – your body suspended horizontal by the glider – so you won't tumble to a stop.

Duncan volunteered to go first, and our group went clockwise after that, making me second. Duncan hiked to the crest of the hill, then started jogging down it. He began running, and about halfway down the hill, the mellow wind lifted the glider off his shoulders, and his harness hauled him up into the air with it. He rose about ten feet or so, swooping along over the brown grass, then lost steam and started softly descending. His feet caught the ground, and he ran for a while, but then stumbled and fell forward. The training wheels on the bottom of his triangle fell onto the grass and rolled him safely to a stop. He got up, smiling, and everyone cheered.

I felt a little like I was out of my body, observing myself as I trudged up to the top of the hill. My hands were shaking, even though I was gripping the metal triangle tightly. I could see Duncan walking back up the side of the hill, waving and calling out. I took off running down the hill, and before long, I was lifted up – higher, it felt, than Duncan had gone, but I thought it must just be my vantage point that made it seem so. After about ten seconds, I started descending; my

feet hit the ground but my legs immediately buckled, and I fell forward, rolling on the hard plastic training wheels till I lost momentum and stopped. Then I hefted my glider and walked up the side of the hill, following Duncan, and got in line to do it again.

On Duncan's second ride, he hardly had to run at all; the wind picked up and took him on a slightly higher, longer ride. When it was my turn, and I was at the top of the hill, I only took maybe five or six steps downhill when I was jerked up into the air and was pulled up higher and higher by a big gust of wind.

While I looked down at the receding grassy hill and the faces staring up at me – I was going up, and backwards at an angle – I started to do what Mac had told us, which was to thrust the triangle in the direction I wanted to go. I pushed it down and to the left, which was vaguely the direction where I was supposed to land. But nothing happened. The wind kept pulling me higher. I still had the triangle thrust out toward where I wanted to go, but it wasn't working, and I didn't know what to else to do; I was just frozen like that as the wind pulled me up, slowing now, and raising the tip of the glider until I was pointed straight up. I stopped moving upwards, which is what they call a "stall," I think. I was hanging in the air – I thought I was eighty or maybe even a hundred feet up – and then the glider tipped sickeningly and plummeted straight down.

As I was rushing toward the ground I thought, there's a very good chance I'm about to break bones; I watched the hillside coming up at me, and then I hit. The triangle bent where I was holding it a full 90 degrees, and I heard one of the wings snap; but, what worried me the most was that I had landed with my crotch on top of one of the training wheels. It hadn't hit my balls – I knew that immediately; but the thin arc of the wheel had hit exactly along the length of my penis.

People came running down to me – Mac was the first to get there. “Are you OK, are you OK?” It took me a while to know. I was pretty sure I had heavy bruises all over, but after gingerly moving around a bit, I thought, no, nothing’s broken. “I think I’m OK,” I said, except I had no idea how my penis was. It was numb. And I was scared to even look at it to see that the damage might be. I didn’t do that until I got home, hours later, when I very slowly and carefully took down my pants and saw that it was mass of purple bruises. About ten days later I confirmed that it still worked – that I hadn’t broken it. I was lucky.

But while I was still back there, lying on the side of the Bunny Hill, Mac and some others dragged my ruined glider over to Mac’s truck, and she told everyone very pointedly what I’d done wrong. Yes, you push out the triangle in the direction you want to go, but you can’t just stop after one try – you have to keep doing it until it works, whereas I’d just tried once and then froze.

The next person who went also got pulled up by the wind, but not very high, and she pushed the triangle frantically until she got control of her glider and landed it. After that, Mac said that was it – we were done. The wind was too strong.

Right when she said it, I was struck by this sudden fear that if I didn’t do it one more time, that day, I’d never hang glide again. I told Mac that I wanted to, and she said no, absolutely not. I begged her – and truthfully I’m not totally sure why I felt so strongly about it. I didn’t want to stop like that. It felt like a bad omen for my upcoming trip, my life, everything. I had to try again.

I blurted out something along those lines to Mac. She shook her head – it was a bad idea, she thought, but she ended up letting me do it. I couldn’t tell what Duncan thought of the whole thing; he’d been listening to the exchange but hadn’t said anything either way.

I borrowed someone else's glider – one of the ones that hadn't been folded up yet – and I climbed up to the top of the hill. I think people might have been watching me, but I was staring down the hill, listening to my heart thumping and trying to slow down my breathing, which I couldn't do. I was terrified. But I knew I had to do it somehow. And then I was ready – well, as ready in my head as I could ever be – and I would've started running, but my legs wouldn't move. I pushed them again; I gave them another command to run, but they wouldn't budge. It was like in an old Western when the prospector is pushing the stubborn mule, trying everything he can think of to make it go, but it's like a rock, a huge boulder that can't be budged, not an inch.

I tried again and again, but my legs had totally frozen up – they'd mutinied. It was so strange not to have control of my body. After a while, Duncan came up and helped get me unstuck enough to go back down to the truck, where everyone was waiting. A week later I was up in the air, but this time in a plane so huge it hardly felt like I was flying at all.

Chapter 2

I had a three-hour layover in London, and so I walked around the crowded duty-free shops to kill time before my connecting flight. The last time I went to Rome I also had to stop in London, and the one thing I'd bought was a bottle of Scotch for James. In addition to being a great connoisseur of French and Italian wine, he loved his good whiskey, which was expensive and hard to find in Italy. But that was three years ago – the last time I'd stayed with James, Larissa, and their daughter Zara in Rome.

James, who was a big bullfrog of a man, complete with protruding eyes and a saggy mouth, always ate and drank too much; it caught up with him a year and a half ago in the form of a heart attack, and he died before they could get him to the hospital. I'd liked him; he was one of those guys who knew strange things and who loved telling quirky stories and jokes, usually over dinner and several glasses of wine. I hadn't known what to say when Larissa emailed me to tell me what had happened to him. So I'd just written back and said how sorry I was, and that the house in Rome must be a lot quieter and emptier without him.

I was standing there at the duty-free, wondering if I should buy a Scotch for Larissa. She used to sip at it from time to time, too, but I was afraid it might just remind her of James. In the end, I bought it; I figured I'd keep it in my suitcase and decide when I got there whether or not it was a good idea to bring it out.

By the time I landed in Rome, got through passport control and customs, and took the train into the city center, it was past 11pm. I wheeled my clattering suitcase along the bumpy sidewalk behind me as I walked through the narrow, familiar streets. It was dark, and I was sweating, not so much from the effort of dragging my suitcase, but because it was still in the upper 80s, even at that hour. The app on my phone said it was going to be over a hundred the next day.

When I'd asked Larissa, a few weeks before, if I could stay at her house, she told me yes, of course, but that she and Zara would be in Tuscany the week I was coming in. She'd reminded me where the hidden key was under the electric blue flower pot on the outside stairs and said I could stay in any of the spare rooms, because no one else was coming anytime soon.

That had surprised me because while James was alive, the place was almost like a hotel; there were always people coming through to stay – usually scholars or grad students. Most of them came through some connection to Larissa, who was an art historian, and had moved from Philadelphia to Rome twenty years ago with James. They might have had family money – I'm not sure. What I can say is that James never worked any normal job as far as I could tell, but Larissa taught art history, mostly to Americans studying abroad. That's how I met her when I was an undergrad spending a summer in Rome. Years later, when I was just starting the research for my dissertation, she and James invited me to one of their big dinners out in the courtyard in front of their house, and eventually I became one of the lucky people they invited to stay with them when I came to Rome. They were always very generous like that. I think they liked to have people around. But that was when James was there, and I wondered how things had changed when he died.

I was especially wondering about Zara. She was fourteen the last time I stayed at the house in Rome, and we'd bonded a little because she was – at that time, anyway – getting into

Iron Maiden, Metallica, and other bands I loved. How was she doing, as far as James' death went? It was something I should have asked Larissa over email – how are you both doing? – but I never had.

As I went through the familiar little archway into the *cortile*, or courtyard, in front of their house, I admired the deeply worn columns embedded in the archway. James had told me they'd been put there to bolster one side of the archway when it was constructed in the early Renaissance – a time when Rome was starting to come alive again after a nasty slump in the Middle Ages.

The house itself was a jumble of thin, outdoor staircases and rickety windows but looked picturesque, in its way, in the moonlight. It was one of five or six buildings in the *cortile*, leaning against each other, all old and in pretty bad shape. Bricks showed through the worn layer of stucco in the house's old walls; there were potted flowers strewn on stairs and windowsills, and above these, laundry stretched out on clotheslines.

The wheels of my suitcase were echoing though the little *cortile*, and Rauca must've heard them because the skinny, mangy black cat came out to greet me. His name was his meow, which sounded like two rusty metal plates grating against each other – *Raaoooww-kkkaa*.

He immediately started rubbing up against me, screeching away, as I climbed up the couple steps and got the hidden key. I did this quickly, because I could feel the mosquitos starting to come after me. The Italian word for them is *zanzare*, which is another word with an onomatopoetic quality. They're very small and exceptionally vicious. I opened the front door, went in, and closed it as fast as I could to keep the little fuckers out. Of course, I could already feel a couple bites starting to rise up on my arm.

I fed Rauca a can of his special food; it was the same expensive stuff he'd been eating when I'd visited last. This was something Larissa insisted on, even though it hadn't seemed to have helped Rauca's skin condition much. After that, I lugged my suitcase up to the second floor, and it shuddered with each step I took. It actually went all the way up to the fourth floor, where there was only a solitary, cramped room. Not that that was the only cramped room – they all were – and the old floorboards creaked every time you took a step or shifted your weight.

Family money or no, the place was not what I'd call luxurious. Only two of the eight little rooms had AC units. Only one of the three showers worked at any given time, lights were often busted; and you could count on only one burner working on the stove. But none of that ever bothered me much. The only thing that got to me was when the hot water went out, which was a pain in the ass, even in the hot Roman summer.

I dragged my suitcase onto the second floor, through what was a sort of living room – which no one ever wanted to sit in because it smelled faintly of dead rat, and the mosquitoes had a tendency to cluster in there – and then into James' old studio, which adjoined it.

It was strange, going in there, because it looked just like I remembered it. Well, it was much cleaner, actually, but there were still piles of paper cuttings and glue on the desk – one of James' unfinished collages, I imagined – as well as a coat hanger he'd twisted into the shape of a face with a wide, crooked smile. There were others wire faces, but with different expressions, dangling from the ceiling. James made them for fun; he never considered himself an artist – although a lot of the people who knew him did.

Inside the studio was a ladder that went down into the dark room I usually stay in. They called it "the cave." It didn't have AC, but it stayed relatively cool, and there was a little bathroom down there.

After I'd put a few toiletries on the sink and splashed some water on my face, I felt like a drink. I didn't want to open up one of Larissa's bottles of wine, although I doubt she would have minded, so I got the Scotch out of the duty-free bag and went back up the ladder into James' study. I poured a little Scotch on the desk for him. It made me laugh – there was something about the way it pooled. I guess I was feeling tired and emotional but didn't want to cry.

I took a couple slugs of Scotch for myself and mopped up the little puddle of with my sleeve; then I climbed the rickety metal staircase, peeking into rooms as I wound my way up to the fourth floor. There was only one little room up there, with a low ceiling that angled down on one side, conforming to the shape of the roof. I went in; it had changed since I'd been there last – Zara had moved in.

The first time I stayed over – this was about ten years ago, when I was a grad student – James told me a story about that top room and about the house.

The house was built right behind the ruins of the ancient Theater of Pompey, which was a huge complex with a both a temple and an outdoor theater which could seat twelve thousand people on one end, and a big meeting hall on the other end. In between were long galleries filled with famous statues taken from all over the Mediterranean, as well as extensive gardens with fountains and exotic plants and trees.

The complex was built by Pompey the Great around 50 BCE with the spoils of his conquests in the eastern Mediterranean. A few years after it was completed, Pompey fought against Julius Caesar in a civil war and was killed after losing a decisive battle to Caesar.

But Pompey got his revenge. Four years later, Julius Caesar was stabbed to death in the big meeting hall in Pompey's Theater complex, right underneath a statue of Pompey.

On the other side of the complex, rising out of the back of the theater stands, was a temple to Venus Victrix (Victorious Venus) – she was Pompey's favorite goddess. You could still see the broken brick edge of the temple wall on one of the buildings surrounding the public square, Campo de' Fiori. And if you went down into the basements of a couple of the Campo's restaurants, you'd find yourself ducking through the theater's ancient arcades.

All this was to say that the area around the theater, including James' and Larissa's house, was a center of religious, cultural, and political life in ancient Rome. Priestesses and priests, actors, playwrights, and musicians lived there, so they could be close to the theater and the taverns and shops that sprang up around it. The area was similar today; it was filled bars and restaurants – there was even a live theater that sat about twenty feet above the buried stage of Pompey's Theater.

In the Middle Ages, workshops came to dominate the neighborhood, as the current street names told you – Via dei Balestrari (street of the crossbow makers), Via dei Cappellari (street of the hat makers), etc. Later, as the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance, the Campo began hosting an outdoor market (it still did), as well as public burnings and hangings – most famously for heresy. And of course, the whole time, this rough and tumble area was also known for its brothels, one of which was the house I was staying in.

James said the house's brothel had been called *La Casa della Sorpresa* – The House of Surprise. The way it was set up was that the lower level housed the rooms where the cheapest whores were, and then as you went up to the second and third levels, the women (and some men, he said) were increasingly beautiful, charming, and sexually talented. In the single room at the top was a guest-whore, different every week and hence a "surprise." These were often foreign or exotic prostitutes, who, according to a drunken James over dinner, were so astoundingly

seductive that they could melt away every last inhibition, every care, every moral qualm within the souls of the men who visited them. James said he'd seen a seventeenth-century guidebook that had described *La Casa della Sorpresa* – pointing it out next to the Campo on a drawn map – and that the book had called the room at the top, where these wondrous or diabolical things occurred, the Cleopatra Room. I never saw the guidebook but often wondered if James had pages from it in his old notes somewhere, or if the book itself sat hidden away, pushed back into one of the deep, dusty bookshelves of his studio.

There I was, in that same top room – the Cleopatra Room – looking through the little square window out over the dark *cortile*. It was hot in the room, so I opened the window to let in the slight breeze from outside, and I turned on a lamp sitting on the dresser.

The light was dim, and as it shone on the old warped walls and floor, the whole room took on a distorted look. There were several messy charcoal sketches hung on the walls; the one next to the window in front of me was a somewhat abstract landscape full of grayish craters. It looked inspired by the surface of the moon.

Zara, I thought, had to be seventeen now. I remembered her as a nerdy but basically normal teenage girl. Of course it had been three years. Her father had died, and who knows what else had happened in her life.

The image I had in my head of her, from those few years ago, was of a girl who chewed her hair and who rarely looked up from either the fantasy novel she was reading or the pad she was drawing on. The pictures she made at that time – the couple that I remembered, anyway – were drawn with colored pencils and were of little Rauca, who was a kitten then, and of a stray orange cat that used to wander into the house sometimes to eat Rauca's food.

Dark though her new drawings were, they seemed to belong in that room, and almost mirrored the shadowy *cortile* I could see through the window.

I began to feel like I was snooping, so I shut the window, turned off the light, and went back down the quivering staircase. I milled around in James' studio for a while after that. Rauca sat on the floor scratching the dry patches in his fur while I drank Scotch and sifted through the shelves, looking for the old guidebook.

Pretty soon I got tired and clambered down the ladder into the cave. I turned the fan toward me, lay down on the narrow bed, and stared up at the old wooden beams in the ceiling above me. I tried to sleep, but I kept hearing creaking noises coming from the floors above me. I'd never stayed in that old house by myself before – it'd always been full of people. Lying there, even though I knew how ridiculous it was, I was afraid, and when I finally fell asleep, I had unsettling dreams.

Chapter 3

I woke up early because of the jet lag or the Scotch and tried going back to sleep for a while, but finally gave up. I went upstairs to use the shower on the third floor, which, in past visits, was pretty reliable in terms of hot water. They'd also installed a shower curtain since I'd been there last. Probably one of the guests had done it. (Most of the maintenance happened that way.) It was nice; I didn't create a lake in the process of showering.

After I fed Rauca, I tried to get the stove working to make some coffee but eventually gave up and walked the couple hundred yards to a café just off the Campo, where I slammed down an espresso standing up at the bar like everyone else. Not that I didn't wanted to sit down, but you literally pay double if you wanted to do that, which is a ridiculous custom in some ways, but makes sense when you think of all the people dug in at Starbucks in the US. A lot of students spend the whole day there for the price of a drip coffee, which might not be the best business model, not that the Italians have it figured out.

After that, I stopped in at the bakery a couple doors down and got a few pieces of *pizza bianca*, which is a crisp flatbread with olive oil and sea salt. I can eat tons of it pretty much anytime, but it was especially good for the slight hangover I seemed to have gotten from the Scotch.

When I got outside, I squinted up at the sun; it was only around 8:00, but it was already hot. I didn't feel up to dealing with any Italian bureaucrats quite yet, so I changed my original

plan of going to the state archives in the old Sapienza palazzo, pretty as that place was, and went up to the American Academy instead. I used to go there when I was a grad student. It was comfortable up there and it was easy to find things – if you know what you're looking for, that is.

When I finally huffed and puffed my way up there, sweating like a pig, I buzzed at the black metal gate, staring through the bars at the little booth where the *portiere* sat. I saw him crane his neck out at me, giving me a sour look. I didn't recognize him, but I waved hopefully to him, and he finally bestirred himself with what seemed like a lot of effort, shuffled over to the door of the gate, and looked through the bars at me without saying a word.

"*Buongiorno*," I started, and then tried to explain, fumbling around with my rusty Italian that I was a visiting scholar who'd been there before and that I wanted to use the library.

He looked at me without expression and said, in Italian, that a *tessera* – a card granting access – was *obbligatoria*, and he turned to go back to his hutch. I said I was a professor from California and asked, very politely, if he could let me into the library, which is the only place you can get a pass. He turned his head to the side, not far enough to face me, and intoned, *Non c'e nessuno libero*. Of course there was someone available, I thought – the *portieres* were protective of the Academy and suspicious of outsiders. I told him again that I'd been there many times in the past, but he just said, *Non c'e nessuno*, sharper this time, and crunched along the gravel back to his little guard box.

I considered buzzing until I annoyed him enough to come out again, but I knew that Larissa would be back soon; she knew people on the Academy's board, and could help get me in.

So I sweated my way back down the hill and headed over to the old Sapienza, which had originally been the site of Rome's first university. The archives there consisted of a great mess of

old official documents from the Papal States. When I was doing my research for the Vesuvius article, I'd run across a monograph written by an Italian scholar, Tomaso Petrucci, in 1936, which was just after Mussolini's bureaucracy had reorganized the state archives, and had transferred a number of them to the Sapienza.

In his 1936 monograph, Tomaso Petrucci attempted to trace the shift from predominantly red wine over to white wine in masses given by the early popes. His conclusion was that the change happened during the pontificate of St. Cletus, who had become the third pope in 76 CE – twelve years after St. Peter's death. The scholar claimed that Cletus' taste in wine had changed from red to white as he got older, possibly due to some digestive issue; as proof of the shift, he cited receipts for wine bought by the pope's steward, which showed that before 80 CE, mostly red wine from Central Italy was being purchased, and after that year, wine orders were predominantly for white wine made in Greece and Turkey.

I absolutely had to see those receipts, which, according to the monograph's bibliography, were stored in the new (new at the time the monograph was written, that is) archives at the Sapienza. Mostly, I wanted to see how the prices in wine had changed after Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE. Had they skyrocketed because the best Italian vineyards had been destroyed along with nearby Pompeii?

Maybe Pope Cletus' taste hadn't changed at all. Maybe he'd been forced to make do with wine from the East because the best Italian wine was in short supply. White or red may not have had anything to do with it.

This is what was going through my head – and I was feeling quite hopeful, but also fearful, since this was my best and only lead – as I walked through the Sapienza's grand arcaded *cortile* and up the wide marble staircase to the door marked *Archivio di Stato*. Which was locked.

*

Not that I was surprised, exactly. There were often strikes, especially with the buses and metro, and there were a lot of public holidays that seemed random to me. I searched my throbbing head for what holiday it might be, and I realized it was June 29th, the Feast of Peter and Paul. It was only celebrated in Rome, as far I knew, but I had the vague memory of fireworks on that night from the two years I'd lived in Rome. I figured there'd probably be some tonight up near Castel St. Angelo. Maybe I'd go watch them, or if I were too jet lagged, I might be able to see them from Zara's window. I certainly wasn't having any luck doing anything productive, not yet, anyway.

I thought about going across town over to the library at the British School. I knew they conformed to British holidays and had to be open; I also knew they'd let me in without a special pass but that they gouged visitors who weren't British citizens, charging a high entry fee. It was £25 ten years ago and had probably gone up since then. The problem with that idea was that I didn't know exactly what I was looking for – not in that library, anyway, and the thought of paying so much just to flail around in there didn't sound appealing.

Plus, I was suddenly tired – it was the jet lag, I think – and I was hot. I started walking along the sidewalk, close up to the tall old buildings, so that I was covered by the sliver of shade they cast on the concrete. My head sagged as I walked, watching my feet take one slow step after another.

When I finally looked up, I saw the Pantheon a little ways ahead of me. I guess I'd gone into some kind of auto-pilot, zombie-walking the few blocks there from the Sapienza.

It made sense, though, in a way; the Pantheon had always been a sort of beacon for me, and not just figuratively. When you go through the huge, ancient bronze doors, your eyes, and the rest of your body, it almost feels like, are sucked up toward the center of the dome, a hundred fifty feet up. There's a wide hole there in the dome that they call the oculus – the eye – and on that day a beam of light was shining through it. It was a soft golden color, alive with curling dust motes. It made me relax, and I felt a little smile bloom on my lips. I don't want to say something trite like: my problems suddenly melted away, dwarfed by the ancientness of the temple, and by its beauty. But there's some truth to that. It was full of tourists, but that didn't spoil it for me; we were all there experiencing the awe of the place together – each in our own way.

I don't normally go to churches when I'm in Rome, which sounds funny, I guess, to anyone who's not an ancient historian, an archaeologist, or classicist. I think that the churches are, for the most part, beautiful – especially the ones inspired by classical architecture, but I have traditionally gravitated to the older sites, the ones made before Christianity knocked the old gods out of the heavens.

Maybe it was because I didn't understood Christianity very well. It didn't speak to me while I was growing up; God seemed to me to be dull and oppressive compared with the lively, permissive pagan gods. But that was before – well, I don't want to get ahead of myself.

I left the Pantheon and headed back toward the house, stopping at a little shop for a couple bottles of Grechetto (a white wine that I got in honor of Pope Cletus, whose receipts I hoped to see the following day), a half loaf of Lariano bread, and some cheese (an aged, soupy Toma).

When I got back, I took a nap down in the cave, and by the time I woke up, it was dark outside. I pulled one of the wine bottles out of the fridge, made myself a plate of bread and

cheese, and headed up to Zara's room. I opened the window, and as the breeze rushed in, I searched the night sky for fireworks. But I only saw rooftops and the sides of buildings taller than my four stories up. There was also a couple down below the window, who had probably wandered into the *cortile*. I couldn't really see them – just dark silhouettes and the glowing tips of their cigarettes. They were speaking a language I didn't understand – it wasn't Italian; I thought they might be tourists on a honeymoon or some romantic getaway because they were speaking low and sweetly to each other.

Then suddenly the man's voice became harsh and cutting, and the woman's became shrill, and there were pounding footsteps, and they were gone. I wondered what happened. I felt tired again and slightly nauseated – maybe there had been something wrong with the cheese, I thought. So I went back down into the cave and wanted to go to bed, but ended up spending most of the night on the toilet.

Chapter 4

The nausea went away, mostly anyway, in the early morning, and I was able to sleep for a couple hours. Then I was woken up by some kind of knocking from the neighboring house. I didn't know what it was – some kind of carpentry, it sounded like – and after a while I just groaned, banged on the wall a few times in protest, and got up because now I was mad and I knew that even if the noise stopped I wouldn't be able to go back to sleep.

The good news, though, was that I was able to get one of the burners going on the stove in the kitchen and make myself espresso using a moka pot – one of the big ones. That fixed my mood up a little, but ravaged my stomach; and after another long spell on the toilet, I finally got myself out of the house and back over to the *Archivio* at the Sapienza.

There, luckily, the stout woman at the front desk accepted my university ID. She made me fill out several different forms, and as I turned each one into her before starting on the next, she punched it with stamps – each one echoing like a shot through the once-grand, but now dilapidated and somewhat depressing marble halls of the old palazzo.

After I went through a metal detector that I'm pretty sure didn't work, I sat down at a scuffed desk in front of a black computer screen with a blinking green cursor.

The terminal had a search function, but I couldn't figure out how to use it; everything I tried seemed to lock it up, so I had to start over. Or when it seemed to be working, and I could

hear it chewing very slowly on the search term I'd given it, it would inevitably spell out in green letters: *nessun risultato.*

It didn't seem to matter what I searched for; there were no results for Pope Cletus, none for Tomaso Petucci, and when I put in other terms for high profile subjects, like Pope Paul II – I even tried Saint Peter – I got the same response: *nessun risultato.*

I got up and asked the woman at the front desk if she could help me, and she pointed down the corridor at a long line in front of the librarian's office. That didn't look at all enticing, so I wandered around, searching through random shelves, which held boxes upon boxes crammed with loose, yellowing papers documenting baptisms, appointments of priests and bishops, and construction plans for churches. I couldn't find anything from any period earlier than the 19th century.

I finally resorted to trying to get help from a librarian, and got into the line that – I had the surreal inkling – hadn't actually moved since I'd been inside the building.

After the first half hour, though, I could confirm from the placement of my feet on a wide crack in the marble floor that the line was indeed moving, just very slowly. But every time I took a half-step forward I would, a few minutes later, be pushed back to my original position on the floor's crack, which began to take on a supernatural and ominous meaning for me.

As far as I could tell, each time someone in line went into the librarian's office and was helped, they were replaced by someone who worked at the archives who went straight into the office without waiting on some sort of official business, I assumed.

Every time that happened there was a roar of outrage from all the Italians in line, which let off collective steam, but didn't accomplish much else. If anything, it made matters worse because after my first hour in line, I began to see that I was actually moving backwards.

I kept waiting, and after another hour I began to feel ill again, and all I could think about was drinking a cold beer and having a few crackers.

When I couldn't stand it any longer, I went back outside into the stifling heat and started heading back toward to the house. On one of the side streets approaching the Campo, I passed a little bar with a Peroni sign in the window and went in.

I ordered a beer and asked the bartender for some *grissini*, and he had some – not ones from the bakery, but the thin, bland breadsticks that come in the wax paper packaging. They were perfect.

I finished my beer quickly, munching away in between gulps, and when I paid my bill, I got a couple of large Peroni bottles to go. I took those back to the house with me.

While I was drinking the first one, I searched James' desk drawers and bookshelves again, looking for the old travel book that, he said, had mentioned *La Casa della Sorpresa*.

I didn't find anything, though, and I started to think he'd just made up the whole thing. It didn't exist, and neither did the receipts for Pope Cletus' wine. Tomaso Petrucci had probably made those up, knowing no one would actually go to the archives to double check on his "discovery." But he knew that his article would get him a job, which it did – he was hired by a university in Bologna in the late 30s and had a successful career there until he'd retired forty years later.

While I was in that line at the *Archivio*, I'd nursed a fantasy that once I reached the front, a hunched librarian would take me through some back rooms to a heavy oak door that she would open – her old hand quivering – with a long, rusty key; I would follow her down the worn stairs, which she would take very carefully, one step at a time, into a dungeon where she'd produce Saint Cletus' wine receipts. They'd be on sheets made of papyrus, bound into a codex kept on a

little niche in the wall next to Cletus' bones, his wormy vestments, and other relics. And the librarian would explain to me slowly that they'd been unearthed near the altar of an old church during one of Mussolini's many excavation projects.

In 1936 Tomaso Petrucci was a young, floppy-haired graduate student. He been part of the excavation and had been one of the first people to see St. Cletus' relics and documents. But I would realize as I moved my candle over the rotting papyrus pages the librarian was showing me that he hadn't recognized the wine receipts' true significance. They would make my career and challenge the most basic assumptions historians had made up to that point about wine, ritual, and religion.

I imagined the various award ceremonies and the receptions that would come after my discovery, but as I started to envision being approached by fawning academic groupies, I was jolted out of the fantasy by its silliness.

I began to browse James' shelves, no longer searching for the antique guidebook, but merely for some light reading that would distract me from worries about my research.

Nothing on his shelf looked like much fun, so I went back into the kitchen, grabbed another beer, and climbed up the rickety stairs to Zara's room, hoping she'd have something good up there to read.

She had a lot of fantasy books on her shelves, including a whole slew of volumes by Tolkien – which surprised me, because I didn't think he'd written that much. When I saw *The Lord of the Rings*, I thought: perfect. It's boring enough so there's no danger of my heart rate going up, and I'd only read it once, forever ago, over the summer after my freshman year in college. I'd always meant to do it again, but it'd been such a slog that I hadn't steeled myself to

the commitment it required. Maybe I could get through it, I thought, if nothing else, during this summer – the tail end of my career as a tenure-track professor.

It wouldn't mean the end of teaching, though. I could still do that, but I might be able to get a short-term contract as a Visiting Assistant Professor at a little university or college off the beaten track somewhere. Or I could teach as an adjunct. That was honorable; I knew a lot of adjuncts who were smart, good teachers, and who cared about their students. But I couldn't deny that it would be a step down.

Adjuncts don't get much say in what they teach, they don't get much respect, and they certainly don't make a lot of money – most schools barely pay them a living wage.

But they often don't have to attend departmental meetings; they're mostly spared having to deal with department politics; and, they don't have to publish.

I was no good at publishing, and I was sick of banging my head against that brick wall. So I lay down on Zara's bed with *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and used the remote on her nightstand to turn on the little AC unit mounted near the ceiling behind my head. The machinery made a grinding noise and started a high-pitched whining as it dropped needles of icy air down onto me, pricking my sweaty skin.

I stayed there reading for the rest of that day and evening, and I was tired, so I decided to sleep there since Larissa and Zara wouldn't be back for a couple days yet. I did the same thing the next day, and by the afternoon I was pretty far along in the book; I was at the part where Frodo and Sam break with the Fellowship and go alone on the hopeless quest to throw the ring into the volcanic gullet of Mount Doom.

That's where I was when I looked up and saw a skinny girl with acne standing in the doorway, looking at me with wide eyes.

Chapter 5

I guess I hadn't heard them come in, probably because the AC was so loud, and I was embarrassed that I was sitting there, lounging like a slob in her bed. There were Peroni bottles covering her nightstand, and I was a disheveled, smelly mess; it probably looked to her like some giant rodent had nested in her room while she was away.

"I'm so sorry," I said, jumping up. "I wasn't going to stay in your room, but the – ah – well, I was looking for a book, and then I turned on the AC, and the next thing you know –" I gave her a little shrug and smiled.

"It's OK," she said politely. "I don't mind."

But I could tell she did. Of course, she did. I felt like such an ass, but I tried to rally. "Hi, Zara. I'm Joe. Do you remember me?"

"Yeah," she said, putting her backpack on the floor. "My mom told me you were staying."

"It's nice of you guys to have me. How, ah – how've you been? It's been a few years."

"I'm OK," she said, sitting down in her desk chair.

"That's, good to hear, that's –" and as I was searching for something to say, she stood up and sat down again, twice. Then she opened up her backpack and took her computer out, like nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

I busied myself stripping the sheets. “How’s school been?” I asked. “You’re going to the American school near the Borghese Gardens, right?”

She nodded. “You don’t have to do that.”

“What?”

“Change the sheets,” she said, her voice slightly strained.

“It’ll only take me a minute.”

“Really,” she said. “I mean, I can do it.”

“Oh, OK,” I said. Clearly she wanted me out of there. So I went to put *The Fellowship of the Ring* back on the bookshelf where it’d been.

“You can borrow that,” she said, mustering a smile. “How far are you?”

I turned to look at her, still holding the book. “Frodo and Sam just left to go to Mount Doom on their own.”

“Oh, you’re at the end,” she said. “You have to read *The Two Towers* now.” She came over to the bookcase, pulled out the book, and gave it out to me.

“You don’t mind if I borrow it?”

“No, I don’t mind,” she said. “I mean, you can’t stop now. It’s like – it’s like Frodo and Sam, they know they’re gonna die up there, but they go anyway. They go, and it’s so brave.”

“You’re right,” I said. “It’s very brave.”

She stood there nodding excitedly, and then she didn’t know what else to say. She looked down at her feet.

“Thanks for letting me borrow this,” I said, holding up the book. “And sorry for violating the privacy of your room.”

"Lots of people have slept in here," she said. I didn't know if she meant visitors who were friends of her mom's, like me, or all the people who'd slept with the "surprise" whores in that room over the many years it was a brothel. The thought struck me that quite a few of the whores must have been seventeen-year-old girls, just like Zara, or even younger. And suddenly I wanted to get out of there, so I scooped up the empty Peroni bottles, said I'd see her later, and went downstairs.

When I got to the kitchen, Larissa was at the sink with her back turned, doing all the dishes I'd used over the last few days. Well done, you lazy asshole, I thought to myself, as I dumped the bottles I had in my arms into the recycling bin, which fell with a loud clanging.

Larissa turned around. Her thin lips were closed tight, and I noticed that her short hair had gotten grayer and more steely looking since I saw her last. I started to apologize, but before I could, she said, "It's like having two teenagers in the house instead of one."

I know it's not that funny, but I wanted to laugh and had to fight hard to force it down. She could tell what I was doing, and she sort of reared up on her heels like she was going to throw a glass at me, but instead she started laughing, and then I did too.

I said, "You're completely right, Larissa – I'm a jackass. What can I do to make it up to you?"

She put her hand, dripping wet from the dishes, on her hip and looked at me. "You can buy some more food for Rauca. Do you remember where the shop is?"

I had a vague recollection of going up to it the last time I'd stayed. "That place on, ah, Via Coronari?"

"No," she said. "Via Cappellari."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I remember where that is now."

"Good," she said. Then she took a deep breath and said quietly, "I could use some help with Zara, too."

"Of course, sure. What can I do?"

She looked out the window behind me, shaking her head slightly. "I wish I knew. She's been – " She cleared her throat. "Ever since James – "

Her eyes filled up with tears. She shook her head again. "And I just don't know what to do to help her. Everything she talks about has some awful, morbid twist to it, and her little behaviors are becoming full blown OCD and I just – " She stifled a little sob. "I could use some help. I mean, she could." She wiped her eyes but was biting her lip to keep it from trembling.

I stepped over to her, wrapped my stinky arms around her, and she crumpled into me, taking little gulps of air as she tried not to cry but did anyway.

That evening, I went to go buy Rauca's food, and while I was out, I passed a deli and decided on a whim to go inside. I bought some good guanciale there, which is like pancetta except a little fattier; it goes into two of the three classic Roman pasta dishes, carbonara and amatriciana. I don't do carbonara well, but I learned how to cook amatriciana as a grad student, partly to try to impress the only date I had during that period.

You cube the guanciale, throw it in a pan and cook it so it's crispy on the outside and soft in the middle. What I do next, though, is controversial; I've seen Italians get close to violence over the question of whether or not it's delicious or absolute sacrilege to put onions in

amatriciana. I escape the argument on a technicality – I use shallots, which work pretty well, I think, because they're sweeter than onions.

The shallots, along with the guanciale, go into a sauce that you make from peeled tomatoes. Then you pour that, of course, over your pasta. I usually use rigatoni, because it's not so messy (an important thing on a date), but lots of people use bucatini. Once you've got the sauce on there, you spoon some grated pecorino over it, which is really salty, so you don't need any extra salt or anything.

I cooked my amatriciana for the girls that night, which would have been difficult if Larissa hadn't found a way to get a second burner on the stove working. But she did, and we opened up a bottle of Cesanese, which is an odd red wine that comes from the countryside east of Rome, about an hour away. The wine smells like dirty socks to me, although I guess the proper thing to say is it's earthy with notes of mushroom, or something like that.

Everyone enjoyed the wine, sitting at the table we'd set out in the *cortile*. Larissa and I easily finished the bottle (with a little help from Zara). Meanwhile, the mosquitoes were enjoying us, and I got bites that kept me scratching for the next week.

*

The following day, after Larissa found out that I hadn't been able to get into the Academy library, she offered to take me up there herself. It'd just come up in conversation; at that point I wasn't gung ho about doing any more research at the *Archivio*, the Academy, or anywhere else. But since she offered, I thought it couldn't hurt to go.

Zara came too. Larissa had told her about the problems I was having with my research, and that I desperately needed help and encouragement. She was playing us off on each other.

Once Larissa had ushered us through the Academy's gate, across the palazzo's grounds, and into the library, she left. She said she had appointments, but I had the feeling she needed some time to herself – not that I blame her.

As she was walking out, one of the librarians came up to us. He was a young guy with slicked hair, a bushy beard, and a vest. I guess he'd seen us with Larissa.

"Hello," he said. "May I help you find something?"

"Sure, yes, please," I said. "Do you have anything earth-shatteringly important, but undiscovered, in the intersection between ancient wine and Mount Vesuvius?"

He nodded slowly, and said, "Undiscovered? No. But, have you tried Pliny?"

"Yes," I said. "It's been a while, though. Probably worth a second look."

"Whose Pliny?" Zara asked.

"Follow me," the guy said. He spun around and led us down a corridor lined with polished walnut paneling, through a door, and then into the blocks of towering walnut bookcases that, as a grad student, had reminded me of the hedge maze in *The Shining*.

There were a lot of stories about that part of the library. Some involved sightings by Academy fellows over the years of a long-dead librarian who roams the lanes between bookcases. There were also stories of the living: Larissa herself told that right after she finished her Ph.D., a famous art historian (forty years her senior) had taken her into one of the secluded alleys between shelves one evening after an Academy party. He'd pulled out a book with

pictures of pornographic frescoes from Pompeii, and as he spoke in an academic tone about the artistic significance of this fresco and that, he had run his fingers up her sleeveless arm.

She said that part of her had been flattered and tempted by the offer – he was a hero of hers; he was charming and brilliant. But as his hand inched its way onto her breast, she reflexively made a excuse and quickly left.

The place our librarian finally stopped may well have been the same spot, give or take a shelf, because the writings of Pliny were usually kept among other works having to do with Pompeii. In fact, as the librarian pulled down the thick volume of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, I couldn't help scanning the titles of the books around it for one that might have the ancient porn that had failed to seduce Larissa. But I didn't see anything with an obvious title like, *Erotic Pompeii*, that might have been it.

While I was scanning the shelves, Zara picked out a few books for herself, and we settled ourselves at a walnut table in a clearing between the bookshelves.

"So who's Pliny?" Zara asked.

"He was a lot of things," I said. "He was a good friend of the Emperor Vespasian, who built the Colosseum. He was an admiral in the Roman navy, and he was a scholar."

Zara pulled the book toward her and opened it up. "What's his book about?"

"It's about everything," I said. "Agriculture, viticulture, astronomy, geography – everything Pliny learned throughout his life. He died right after he finished it."

Zara looked up sharply, and I thought, oh shit, I shouldn't have said that.

"How did he die?" she asked.

She didn't look upset – just interested. So I thought, I started this, I should roll with it. "He saw Mount Vesuvius erupting way off in the distance," I said. "And he got onto one of his ships and sailed toward it to try to rescue people who were living next to the volcano."

"That's like Frodo and Sam going to Mount Doom," she said, leafing through the book.

"Yeah, it is," I said. "Only Pliny didn't come back."

Maybe I shouldn't have added that last part because she closed the book gently, and then opened and closed it nine more times. I counted. At first I didn't say anything, but then I thought, well shit, it's worse if you pretend it's not happening. That's saying it's such a horrible behavior that it can't even be talked about.

I said, "Did you do that nine times for Frodo's nine fingers?"

She looked embarrassed for a second, but then a smile cropped up in one corner of her mouth, like she'd been caught. "Maybe," she said. "I don't know – it just felt like the right number. I don't plan how many times. I do it till it feels finished."

"Does it go on longer than that sometimes?"

She nodded. "It drives my mom crazy." Then she flipped to the table of contents. "What should we look at?"

I didn't want to press her, so I tried to answer her question. The last time I'd looked at Pliny was a few years ago when I was writing my Vesuvius article; I'd been rushed, so I'd only focused on books 14, 17, and 23, which are the sections where he's mainly talking about vineyards and winemaking. But as I began to turn the first few pages of the book, I saw that the introduction consisted of letters written by Pliny's nephew, Pliny the Younger, who also witnessed the eruption of Vesuvius, and wrote the letters years later to his friend, the historian Tacitus, what the eruption had been like and how his uncle had died. I thought they might be

good for Zara somehow. I hadn't read them since I was an undergrad, but I remembered being touched by them.

"Let's start here," I said. "It's about what it was like being caught in the Vesuvius' eruption." She scooted over closer to me, and side by side, we read:

My dear Tacitus,

You ask me to write you something about the death of my uncle so that the account you transmit to posterity is as reliable as possible. I am grateful to you, for I see that his death will be remembered forever if you treat it in your Histories. He perished in a devastation of the loveliest of lands, in a memorable disaster shared by peoples and cities, but this will be a kind of eternal life for him. Although he wrote a great number of enduring works himself, the imperishable nature of your writings will add a great deal to his survival. Happy are they, in my opinion, to whom it is given either to do something
worth writing about, or to write something worth reading; most happy, of course, those who do both. With his own books and yours, my uncle will be counted among the latter. It is therefore with great pleasure that I take up, or rather take upon myself the task you have set me.

He was at Misenum in his capacity as commander of the fleet on the 24th of August (79 CE), when between 2 and 3 in the afternoon my mother drew his attention to a cloud of unusual size and appearance. He had had a sunbath, then a cold bath, and was reclining after dinner with his books. He called for his shoes and climbed up to where he could get the best view of the phenomenon. The cloud was rising from a mountain at such a distance we couldn't tell which, but afterwards learned that it was Vesuvius. I can best describe its shape by likening it to a pine

tree. It rose into the sky on a very long "trunk" from which spread some "branches." I imagine it had been raised by a sudden blast, which then weakened, leaving the cloud unsupported so that its own weight caused it to spread sideways. Some of the cloud was white; in other parts there were dark patches of dirt and ash. The sight of it made the scientist in my uncle determined to see it from closer at hand.

He ordered a boat made ready. He offered me the opportunity of going along, but I preferred to study – he himself happened to have set me a writing exercise. As he was leaving the house, he was brought a letter from Tascius' wife Rectina, who was terrified by the looming danger. Her villa lay at the foot of Vesuvius, and there was no way out except by boat. She begged him to get her away. He changed his plans. The expedition that started out as a quest for knowledge now called for courage.

He launched the quadriremes and embarked himself, a source of aid for more people than just Rectina, for that delightful shore was a populous one. He hurried to a place from which others were fleeing, and held his course directly into danger.

Was he afraid? It seems not, as he kept up a continuous observation of the various movements and shapes of that evil cloud, dictating what he saw.

Ash was falling onto the ships now, darker and denser the closer they went. Now it was bits of pumice, and rocks that were blackened and burned and shattered by the fire. Now the sea is shoal; debris from the mountain blocks the shore. He paused for a moment wondering whether to turn back as the helmsman urged him. "Fortune helps the brave," he said, "Head for Pomponianus."

At Stabiae, on the other side of the bay formed by the gradually curving shore, Pomponianus had loaded up his ships even before the danger arrived, though it was visible and indeed extremely close, once it intensified. He planned to put out as

soon as the contrary wind let up. That very wind carried my uncle right in, and he embraced the frightened man and gave him comfort and courage. In order to lessen the other's fear by showing his own unconcern, he asked to be taken to the baths. He bathed and dined, carefree or at least appearing so (which is equally impressive). Meanwhile, broad sheets of flame

were lighting up many parts of Vesuvius; their light and brightness were the more vivid in the darkness of the night. To alleviate people's fears, my uncle claimed that the flames came from the deserted homes of farmers who had left in a panic with the hearth fires still alight. Then he rested and gave every indication of actually sleeping; people who passed by his door heard his snores, which were rather resonant since he was a heavy man. The ground outside his room rose so high with the mixture

of ash and stones that if he had spent any more time there escape would have been impossible. He got up and came out, restoring himself to Pomponianus and the others who had been unable to sleep. They discussed what to do, whether to remain under cover or to try the open air. The buildings were being rocked by a series of strong tremors, and appeared to have come loose from their foundations and to be sliding this way and that.

Outside, however, there was danger from the rocks that were coming down, light and fire-consumed as these bits of pumice were. Weighing the relative dangers, they

chose the outdoors; in my uncle's case it was a rational decision, others just chose the alternative that frightened them the least.

They tied pillows on top of their heads as protection against the shower of rock. It was daylight now elsewhere in the world, but there the darkness was thicker than any night. But they had torches and other lights. They decided to go down to the shore, to see from close up if anything was possible by sea. But it remained as rough and uncooperative as before. Resting in the shade of a sail he drank once or twice from the cold water he had asked for. Then came a smell of sulfur, announcing the flames, and the flames themselves, sending others into flight but reviving him. Supported by two small slaves he stood up, and immediately collapsed. As I understand it, his breathing was obstructed by the dust-laden air, and his innards, which were never strong and often blocked or upset, simply shut down. When daylight came again 2 days after he died, his body was found untouched, unharmed, in the clothing that he had had on. He looked more asleep than dead.

Meanwhile at Misenum, my mother and I – but this has nothing to do with history, and you only asked for information about his death. I'll stop here then. But I will say one more thing, namely, that I have written out everything that I did at the time and
heard while memories were still fresh. You will use the important bits, for it is one thing to write a letter, another to write history, one thing to write to a friend, another to write for the public. Farewell.

My dear Tacitus,

You say that the letter I wrote for you about my uncle's death made you want to know about my fearful ordeal at Misenum (this was where I broke off). The mind shudders to remember, but here is the tale.

After my uncle's departure, I finished up my studies, as I had planned. Then I had a bath, then dinner, and a short and unsatisfactory night. There had been tremors for many days previously, a common occurrence in Campania and no cause for panic. But that night the shaking grew much stronger; people thought it was an upheaval, not just a tremor. My mother burst into my room, and I got up. I said she should rest, and I would rouse her if need be. We sat out on a small terrace between the house and the sea. I sent for a volume of Livy; I read and even took notes from where I had left off, as if it were a moment of free time; I hardly know whether to call it bravery, or foolhardiness (I was seventeen at the time). Up comes a friend of my uncle's, recently arrived from Spain. When he sees my mother and me sitting there, and me even reading a book, he scolds her for her calm and me for my lack of concern. But I kept on with my book.

Now the day begins, with a still hesitant and almost lazy dawn. All around us buildings are shaken. We are in the open, but it is only a small area and we are afraid, nay certain, that there will be a collapse. We decided to leave the town finally; a dazed crowd follows us, preferring our plan to their own (this is what passes for wisdom in a panic). Their numbers are so large that they slow our departure, and then sweep us along. We stopped once we had left the buildings behind us. Many strange things happened to us there, and we had much to fear.

*

The carts that we had ordered brought were moving in opposite directions, though the ground was perfectly flat, and they wouldn't stay in place even with their wheels blocked by stones. In addition, it seemed as though the sea was being sucked backwards, as if it were being pushed back by the shaking of the land. Certainly the shoreline moved outwards, and many sea creatures were left on dry sand. Behind us were frightening dark clouds, rent by lightning

twisted and hurled, opening to reveal huge figures of flame. These were like lightning, but bigger. At that point the Spanish friend urged us strongly: "If your uncle is alive, he wants you to be safe. If he has perished, he wanted you to survive him. So why are you reluctant to escape?" We responded that we would not look to our own safety as long as we were uncertain about his. Waiting no longer, he took himself off from the danger at a mad pace. It wasn't long thereafter that the cloud stretched down to the ground and covered the sea. It girdled Capri and made it vanish; it hid Misenum's promontory. Then my mother began to beg, and urge, and order me to flee however I might, saying that a young man could make it, that she, weighed down in years and body, would die happy if she escaped being the cause of my death. I replied that I wouldn't save myself without her, and then I took her hand and made her walk a little faster. She obeyed with difficulty, and blamed herself for delaying me.

*

Now came the dust, though still thinly. I look back: a dense cloud looms behind us, following us like a flood poured across the land. "Let us turn aside while we can still see, lest we be knocked over in the street and crushed by the crowd." We had scarcely sat down when a darkness came that was not like a moonless or cloudy night, but more like the black of closed and unlighted rooms. You could hear women lamenting, children crying, men shouting. Some were calling for parents, others for children or spouses; they could only recognize them by their voices. Some bemoaned their own lot, others that of their near and dear. There were some so afraid of death that they prayed for death. Many raised their hands to the gods, and even more believed that there were no gods any longer and that this was one last unending night for the world. Nor were we without people who magnified real dangers with fictitious horrors. Some announced that one

or another part of Misenum had collapsed or burned – lies, but they found believers. It grew lighter, though that seemed not a return of day, but a sign that the fire was approaching. The fire itself actually stopped some distance away, but darkness and ashes came again, a great weight of them. We stood up and shook the ash off again and again, otherwise we would have been covered with it and crushed by the weight. I might boast that no groan escaped me in such perils, no cowardly word, but that I believed that I was perishing with the world, and the world with me, which was a great consolation for death.

*

At last the cloud thinned out and dwindled to no more than smoke or fog. Soon there was real daylight. The sun was even shining, though with the lurid glow it has after an eclipse. The sight that met our still terrified eyes was a changed world, buried in ash like snow. We returned to Misenum and took care of our bodily needs, but spent the night dangling between hope and fear. Fear was the stronger, for the earth was still quaking, and a number of people who had gone mad were mocking the evils that had happened to them and others with terrifying prognostications. We still refused to go until we heard news of my uncle, although we had felt danger and expected more.

*

You will read what I have written, but will not take up your pen, as the material is not the stuff of history. You have only yourself to blame if it seems not even proper stuff for a letter. Farewell.

*

People ask me why, sometimes, I study the ancient world. Or I can tell from a look or an indirect comment – after I mention what I do – that they wonder why I've spent so much of my life studying the dead. I've wondered that myself at times, but I am always reminded, by one thing or another, that Duncan was right – we do not study the dead. Who could be more alive, more thoughtful and soulful, than Pliny?

After we finished reading, Zara looked up from the book and said, "He was my same age, seventeen, but I've never seen the things he did."

"Not many people have been caught in the eruption of a volcano," I said. Inside, I was thinking, in a way, yes, Zara – you both saw the men who raised you go off to die: James left in an ambulance, and Pliny the Elder sailed off in a boat.

Maybe I should have said that to her – only softer – because I wanted her to talk about her dad. I thought that, maybe, if she did, it might help her, which would help me of course, knowing that I was helping her.

But I balked, probably for the better. I just sat there watching her as she opened a different book she'd gotten off the shelf – one that had big glossy pages with photos of Pompeii. She didn't open and shut it more than once, though, so maybe I was seeing a little progress; or maybe her ritual's absence meant nothing.

I pulled the big book closer and turned a few pages to get to the beginning of the Pliny the Elder's encyclopedia. Pliny's style isn't like his nephew's. It's scholarly to begin with, and very raw. I think he can be forgiven for the book's rawness because he hadn't had a chance to

edit it yet when he went off toward Vesuvius on his rescue mission. But the thick, unpolished, dull book felt daunting all the same, and I decided to procrastinate by getting a coffee at the Academy's café.

"Hey," I said to Zara, "You want to get a coffee?"

She was totally engrossed in her Pompeii book and just shook her head.

I got up. "I'm gonna get one. I'll see you in a few minutes."

She nodded reflexively and I wound my way through the stacks and walnut corridors. Once I was outside, I crunched my way through the gravel-covered atrium, past the fountain, and into the café, which has an aged, semi-grand look to it. I went up to the marble-topped bar and ordered a double espresso.

As I was staring at the black-and-white photos on the wall behind the bar, of scholars and artists who had been Academy Fellows a hundred years ago, a man came in and stood next to me at the bar. He was talking aggressively in Italian into his cellphone, which he held with his thick hairy hand.

I thought I recognized the voice, and turned a little more his way, without being too obvious, to get a better look.

It was Dario. He looked older, but it was definitely him.

He must've noticed me staring because he turned his stocky body toward me and gave me a belligerent look. Then he clapped his hands and hung up on whoever he was talking to, and sang thick-accented: "Heyeh Joe-eh, where are you goehn with that gun in yourr hand?"

I gave him a courtesy smile.

He laughed and said, "You got fat, man."

"And you got bald," I threw back, which he had, although the hair he had left was still in a road kill ponytail, just as it had been when we were grad students studying in the Academy library. I'd heard he hadn't finished his degree – I never found out why – but we'd gone out a few times after long days.

"What are you doing up here?" I said.

"Business," he said. His phone started ringing; I could see a couple of academics at the end of the bar wince at how loud it was and shake their heads at Dario, who let the ringing keep ricocheting off the marble table tops and floors.

"And you?" he asked. "You come back to study?"

"I'm supposed to be researching something," I said.

"What?"

"Ancient wine – same as before."

"You still try to get your doctor?"

"My doctorate?"

He nodded impatiently. "Si, doctor-ate."

"No, I'm a professor now. At a university in California."

"*Cazzo!*" he said, clapping his hands. "Professor-eh Joe!"

He gulped his espresso, then tilted his head. "Come tonight, *a casa mia*. I have, eh – a little party."

I scratched my ear, trying to think of an excuse.

"Via Garibaldi," he said. He reached for a pen sitting next to register, scribbled his address on a napkin, and pushed it toward me.

"We open the new Riserva tonight – aged four years," he said. "We have a new, eh – *come se dice? Produttore di vino*."

"Vintner," I said. I had a vague recollection of him talking about a little vineyard one of his uncles or cousins owned, and thought that might be what he meant.

"Ah, yes, veent-nair," he said. "She use only the amphorae to make the wine. The ancient ways." He wagged his finger. "No barrels. No barriques."

I'd heard that some people were making wine now in the giant vase-like amphorae the Romans had used. I'd been meaning to try some but hadn't had the opportunity. I wanted to go. "What time should I come?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Six, seven. You come when you want." Before I could say anything, his phone started blaring, and he strode outside and started yelling at whoever was on the other end again.

*

When I got back to the library, Zara had her book open to a photo of a plaster cast of a boy who died at Pompeii when Vesuvius erupted. He was sitting with his face in his hands.

Zara was sketching him in charcoal on her pad. When I sat down, she said, "He was found in a wine cellar. They said he went down there to get away from the hot ash and all the rocks that were falling. But then a big wave of heat came, like a *tidal wave* of heat, and it was 570 degrees the book says, and it cooked him in like a second. But they don't think it hurt; he died so fast. And then the ash came later, and, um – it covered his body and then he rotted and there was this hole left and when they dug it up, they put something in there, like clay, I don't

know, and then they made this statue of him." She leaned toward the photo. "He looks alive," she said, "doesn't he? And scared. Or just really sad – I think he was crying."

She lifted her sketchpad so I could see. "I'm putting his tears in, just a couple coming down – see? There and there. I mean – not, you know, too much. Because I mean you can't see those, um, in the statue but I really think he was crying, don't you? That's why his hands were up like this, hiding his face."

"You might be right," I said.

She turned back a couple pages in the book. "Here's the dog that was right across on the other side of the cellar. And there were other people, too," she said, turning another page, "but they had all this jewelry, and he didn't have any, so I think he was their slave, and he probably wanted to hug that dog and protect him because he was the one who really loved that dog – he took care of him and fed him – but the rich people owned the dog, and so they were the ones who got to be next to him right before they all got cooked by the volcano."

I took a closer look at the picture. "What kind of dog do you think that was?"

She squinted. "Some kind of street dog. Like the ones they have there now."

"Some things never ever change," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "The last time I went there, my dad took me, and this one dog followed us around the whole time, and we both wanted to keep him – just, you know, put him in the car. But we didn't. We couldn't cause of my mom. They would've gotten in another big fight. And my dad – I mean, she was really mad at him already for something else, so – "

I wanted to ask what Larissa had been mad at him for. Was it for constantly eating gobs of unhealthy food and for drinking so much that he drowned himself in alcohol and grease? Or was it something else? During dinners, more than once, I'd seen him flirting with other women.

It seemed like relatively innocent drunken behavior; I'd doubted that it ever went anywhere, and Larissa didn't seemed to notice. But maybe she was just hiding her feelings, and one day she finally got sick of it.

I went back to Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, which as I said was a bit of a slog, and after a very long hour and a quarter, Zara looked up with her big dark eyes and said, "I think I'm gonna walk back now. Or I can stay. Do you want help?"

"You go ahead," I said.

"Are you cooking again tonight?"

"Oh, sure, yeah. I have to stop by this old friend's place tonight – not exactly a friend, but – anyway I'm not going to stay there long, so, what do you want to eat tonight?"

"Cacio e pepe," she said, which was the third classic Roman pasta dish. A simple one – it was really just a glorified version of macaroni and cheese but Romans take it very seriously. The only problem was, I didn't know how to make it, at least not well. And, like I said, it was a sort of ritual in Rome, so I didn't want to mess with it.

"I don't know how to make that," I said. "I mean, not properly."

"I saw my dad make it a million times," she said. "It's pretty easy. I can do most of it."

"OK," I said. "Should I pick something up? Did your dad use a special kind of cheese or anything?"

"Sometimes we'd get fresh pasta and use that. But we don't need to."

"Oh," I said, "Fresh pasta. That sounds good."

"I know, right?" she said excitedly.

"I'll get some on my way back," I said.

She smiled, nodding, and slung her backpack over her shoulder. “See ya later,” she said, as she left.

I know it doesn’t sound like much, but the whole thing, having people to cook with and someone who was waiting for you to come back – that felt good. I’d been single for so long, I’d forgotten what it was like. The closest thing I’d had were dinners with Duncan every now and then, which were fun but not totally satisfying.

Duncan. Every time I went over there, he’d say I needed to get my joint worked on. That’s how he said it: “You need to get your joint worked on.” I’d never called him on it, but I should have. Who calls it a *joint*?

I also never called him out on how he ruined his marriage by getting *his* joint worked on by one of his grad students. More than one. I’m not saying people shouldn’t be sexual. Because sexuality is important. But Duncan was always giving me shit for not being confident, for not going out on dates, when what he was doing was – well, shit, it’s his life. But I think he still really misses his wife. That’s sad, when you see someone trade something really important for something else that’s nothing more than an ego boost. Poor guy. He feels sorry for me? I feel sorry for *him*.

It made me mad. And then I thought, why the hell am I mad about that? I didn’t want to admit it, but I guess I was a little jealous of Duncan and his flings. Maybe it was a simple case of my joint not getting worked on by anything but a hang glider’s training wheel, or maybe it was that I felt like I had a playhouse family for the moment, and I liked it.

When you’re a professor, it can be difficult because you’ve got all these students around you, and of course they’re beautiful in ways you never appreciated when you were their age. And every now and then one of them might get the tiniest crush on you, which probably isn’t founded

on anything very real – or if it is real, it's probably not very deep – and there's a little vibe you get, and there's a part of you that wants to follow that right down into the forbidden zone.

A lot of professors do it. I know seven personally, six of them men, who have fucked grad students and gotten divorced because of it. Duncan's story was just a grain of sand on a long beach. That's not to say this just happens in California, in Santa Barbara. Academia is rife with sex, a fair amount of it inappropriate, which may seem counterintuitive because of the whole cold, intellectual thing professors are associated with. But I'm telling you that's not true. Most of the professors I know are very sexual – the women as well as the men – except that the women seem to do a better job of staying out of trouble. Well, they get into a ton of trouble when they're grad students, but seem to handle things better as professors. That's my understanding, anyway, but who knows; maybe there were a lot of stories I'm missing out on because I'm a guy and hear more guy stories, which hardly ever turn out well.

Duncan called his wife every day – which wasn't just sad, it was weird because she was remarried. I wonder what they talked about. Maybe Duncan apologized for all the girls he slept with when he went on camping trips while they were married. He still does it. He's part of this group called *The Society for Creative Anachronism*, which sounded, the way he describes it, like a weekend long costume party. People dress up, Duncan told me, in their favorite medieval or Renaissance costumes, and they played around in the forest where they were camping. They drank while Duncan played the oboe and regaled people with scandalous stories from medieval history. And he always ended up in his tent with some girl in her twenties. He tried to get me to come on these outings, but I never took him up on it. Maybe I should. He said the people are fun, and that he felt free there – almost ageless. They didn't judge him for being older. They liked

him; the girls loved sex and wine and whiskey and geeking out on history. It was a kind of heaven for him, although a shallow one.

The relationships Duncan had with the girls he met there didn't ever last, but I kind of like what he said about feeling free and ageless. Not that I'm that old now, but I will be. And even at the age I was, I felt controlled a lot of the time – a little cold and robotic too much of the time.

I imagine everyone goes through this to one degree or another, but maybe professors more than most. You have to practice not looking at students.

If a student, say, happens to just possibly have a crazy, tiny little crush, and say it's an undergrad girl, and she's come to your office hours, you cannot shut the door – you *must not* let your eyes linger that extra split second, even if she seems to be flirting. It takes a lot of control sometimes, but I feel like if I ever did look for that extra second, she'd probably go straight to her computer and say how creepy I was, that gross, fat old guy who leered at her. What was he thinking?

Or on the off chance she was actually interested, you think a relationship with an undergrad, or even a grad student, would turn out well for either person? No. Those are Powerball odds. But it's tough because you're supposed to act like you don't notice any beauty, that you're a eunuch who feels nothing, when the truth is that you just have to control yourself, or you're setting yourself and someone else up for nothing good, potentially something that could get you fired and mess up your life.

So you avert your eyes whenever they might go in a direction that could possibly – even the slightest little bit – be construed as creepy. That's just how you have to do it. I know it's the right thing, but I can't help feeling like a eunuch sometimes.

Our society is a little paranoid about sexuality. I know there are good reasons to control sex, but, still, the way we go about that is – well, I'm pretty sure historians will look back on this period as fairly warped, sexually. Of course, I'm comparing it to sexuality in the ancient world, which was more open in many ways. It's a complicated subject and a controversial one, but yes, I'd say that even with all its famous abuses, the ancient world was more open than ours, overall. And I don't just mean sexually.

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It'd be easy to blame everything on Christianity and say that oppression of libidos only started when Constantine the Great made Christianity the Roman Empire's favored religion. But there were plenty of sexual conservatives around before that.

Pliny the Elder himself, in his encyclopedia, applauded the example of the elephant, which he thought mated only once every other year.

The Emperor Augustus – Julius Caesar's heir and the founder of the Empire – was a notorious prude, at least in word, if not in deed. The Roman historian Suetonius, in his book, *The Lives of the Caesars*, chronicled a feud between Augustus and Mark Antony before the two split publically. In one exchange, Augustus wrote to Mark Antony saying how much he disapproved of Antony's affair with Cleopatra. After Julius Caesar died, Cleopatra and Mark Antony started one of history's greatest love affairs. Of course, Augustus didn't see their relationship that way; he thought it was horribly immoral that Antony, who was married, was sleeping with a woman besides his wife.

Antony responded to Augustus' attack with this letter:

What's the problem? You don't think I should be having sex with Cleopatra here? It's not like this is something new – the affair's been going on for nine years. And what about you? Are you faithful to Livia? I'd be surprised if, when this letter comes, you haven't been to bed with Tertullia, or Terentilla, or Rufilla, or Salvia Titisenia – or all of them at once. Does it really matter so much who we fuck or where we do it?

Mark Antony raises an important question: does it matter who we fuck? It didn't to Duncan when he was in his tent with those girls in Renaissance bodices – loving his wife the whole time, who it *did* matter to.

On the other hand, it feels like we make too big a deal out of sex a lot of the time; and in that sense, I envy how free Mark Antony was.

James told me that the bottom floor of *La Casa della Sorpresa*, where the kitchen is now, used to be the whorehouse's bar area, and if you were there as a customer, you wouldn't just charge upstairs, you'd sit in there for a while and have a drink and talk with the whores. It was the most wonderful thing to be able to talk to these women who – unlike most women during that time – read books, were interested in art and politics, etc. They were wonderful conversationalists, he said. They were smart and playful, and they were able to rise above the oppressive morality of their times.

The way James painted it, sex was fun in *La Casa della Sorpresa*. And maybe that was true much of the time. But I'm sure there was also a very dark side to *La Casa*, that James didn't talk about. I don't blame him for that. Why would he want to invoke the darkness of the house where he closed his eyes and fell asleep every night?

Chapter 6

After Zara left the library, I read Pliny the Elder's encyclopedia for a while, but it felt like a waste of time to go through that dull, thick book again.

Pliny the Younger's two letters about Vesuvius had excited me, though, so I went into the shelves and picked out a compendium with all of his correspondence – all that survives, anyway.

I started with letters written while he was governor of the province of Bithynia, which is now northwestern Turkey. This was about thirty years after he'd watched his uncle sail off toward Vesuvius. I was hoping to find something that would help me bolster my case that wine production throughout the Empire was still suffering because of Vesuvius, even thirty years after it erupted.

Pliny mentions presiding over a court case where a vintner named Caelius Munda, whose vineyard was on the northern Turkish coast. The area was famous for its wine at that time, and was probably a perk to being governor there. Pliny says that Munda, who was personally distasteful to him because of his body odor was suing a farmer up river from him for taking more than his fair share of water. Although that particular case wasn't necessarily helpful, it made me wonder if I should be looking into other court cases – I might find two or three that could form a strong base for my theory. So I decided to fish around in the Marianas Trench of Roman law – the *Code of Justinian*, in particular. It was compiled in the sixth century – well after Constantine

had made Christianity *the* religion of the Empire, but it includes Imperial edicts and Roman jurisprudence going back centuries before that.

The Academy actually has the original manuscript of Fred H. Blume's classic translation of Justinian's *Code*, complete with little handwritten notes taped all over the margins of the typed pages. The manuscript looks like a collage, and the words, at times, sound like they're out of a Monty Python sketch:

We desire that all shall practice the religion that was carried by the divine Peter to the Roman People, as shown by the articles of faith introduced by him and transmitted to us… We order all who accept this law to assume the name of Catholic Christians, decreeing that all others, considering them mad and foolish persons, shall bear the infamy of their heretical dogmas, to be punished first by divine vengeance, and secondly by the exertion of our power which we have received by divine favor.

Since it has, moreover, come to our pious ears that some persons have written and published ambiguous doctrines, which are not in absolute agreement with the orthodox faith laid down by the holy council of the holy fathers who assembled at Nicea and Ephesus, we order that such books shall be burned and delivered to complete destruction, so that they may not ever come to be known by anyone. Persons who continue to have and read such writings and books shall be punished by death. Besides, no one shall be permitted, as we have said, to acknowledge or teach any creed except the one laid down at Nicea and Ephesus.

Reading this made me angry and sad for all the people who were persecuted at that time for believing anything outside the official lines – which meant pagans, of course, but also

Christians with unorthodox leanings, such as the Nestorians, who believed that Jesus existed as two people: Jesus the man and the divine Son of God.

But Christian authorities didn't invent persecution. Christians of all kinds had been persecuted themselves by the Roman government many times – up until Constantine, that is.

It's not that the Roman Empire was particularly intolerant. If your land was conquered by Roman legions, you were still allowed to worship as you pleased, but you also had to show your respect to the Roman gods, which could be as simple as throwing a pinch of incense on an altar's flame during a festival day, or taking a bite of sacrificial meat.

People generally didn't mind doing this so much, because most of them believed in a number of gods, and didn't worry too much about giving the Roman gods their due along with the others.

It was a problem for Jews and Christians, though. They had only one God, and it was blasphemous to acknowledge any other.

But the Jews weren't persecuted as the Christians were because the Romans saw their religion as an established tradition. So they gave Jews a rare dispensation from participating in rituals honoring the Roman gods. The Romans also feared rebellion in the province of Judea, and didn't want to antagonize its inhabitants.

Rome's relationship with Christians, though, was different. Christianity was too new to be considered a legitimate tradition.

Still, every now and then, it had some support in the Roman government. Tiberius was Emperor when Jesus died, and around that time, he asked the Roman Senate to legalize Christianity and declare Christ one of the Roman gods. Tiberius was not a Christian. Foreign gods were often incorporated into the official pantheon as a tactic to ensure loyalty to the

Empire. But the Senate delayed their vote until Tiberius retreated to the isle of Capri, and then they pronounced Christianity to be an illegal superstition.

Despite the Senate's proclamation, Christians were left in peace for about 30 years – up until the Great Fire of Rome broke out during the reign of Emperor Nero. Much of the city was destroyed during the fire, and the rumor got out that Nero had started it himself to make room for his new palace. Nero tried to deflect blame onto the Christians and martyred many of them (including St. Peter) in bizarre, theatrical ways.

The historian Tacitus, to whom Pliny addressed his Vesuvius letters, described the ferocity of Nero's persecutions, and also how they backfired.

Yet no human effort, no princely largess nor offerings to the gods could make that infamous rumor disappear that Nero had somehow ordered the fire. Therefore, in order to abolish that rumor, Nero falsely accused and executed with the most exquisite punishments those people called Christians, who were infamous for their abominations. The originator of the name, Christ, was executed as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius, and though repressed, this destructive superstition erupted again, not only through Judea, which was the origin of this evil, but also through the city of Rome, to which all that is horrible and shameful floods together and is celebrated. Therefore, first those were seized who admitted their faith, and then, using the information they provided, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much for the crime of burning the city, but for hatred of the human race. And perishing they were additionally made into sports: they were killed by dogs by having the hides of beasts attached to them, or they were nailed to crosses or set aflame, and, when the daylight passed away, they were used as nighttime lamps. Nero gave his own gardens for this spectacle and performed a

Circus game, in the habit of a charioteer mixing with the plebs or driving about the race-course. Even though they were clearly guilty and merited being made the most recent example of the consequences of crime, people began to pity these sufferers, because they were consumed not for the public good but on account of the fierceness of one man.

Even though Tacitus was an unforgiving critic of Nero's, he also obviously hated Christians. This was pretty typical of people who were part of the Roman establishment at the time. Pliny himself, during his governorship of Bithynia, wrote to Emperor Trajan to ask how he should deal with Christians in his province:

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

*

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed,

stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ – none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do – these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as 25 years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods and cursed Christ.

*

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food – but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly,

I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

Emperor Trajan, who was reigning at a time when the Empire was very secure and probably at its peak, responded in this way:

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it – that is, by worshiping our gods – even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

Letters like these – especially when compared with the *Code of Justinian* – show how much views of Christianity have changed over the centuries.

The view of it that I grew up with was formed by my three great aunts, who were first generation Italian-American. They lived, up until their 90s, in a little apartment on Lombard Street in San Francisco, and they went to mass every single day, barring extreme illness, of their long lives. They were also wonderfully kind.

When my mom, dad, brother, and sister went to church with them on the occasional Easter, the place was full of very old people; and there was a bent, shriveled priest who was also kindly but who droned on about things I couldn't understand how anyone could believe. Still, I could sense a decrepit magic in the church and in the people who worshipped there. It felt to me like the dying magic of the old ways.

This, I later learned, was exactly how Constantine felt about the old pagan gods and rituals he grew up with. But I'm getting ahead of myself again.

That day in the library, I moved past the *Code of Justinian*'s message of religious unity through intolerance, and I began to sift through the edicts of pre-Christian emperors included in the *Code* to see if they might shed some light on the wine trade in the wake of Vesuvius. I tried, but I had trouble focusing on what I was reading, just as I had with Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, maybe because once I got into the thing, it seemed impossible that I would ever find anything in that ocean of pages to build my case on.

So after slogging it out for a while, I thought, well the least you can do is go out and enjoy the city – who knows when you'll be coming back. I left the library and went out onto the streets, which were still baking, even though it was early evening.

I had this sense that I should've gone by the store and then straight back to Larissa's to cook dinner, but I was in an ornery mood because of my failure to get anything good going with my research. So I turned down Via Garibaldi toward Dario's apartment.

When I got to the address, I looked up from the sidewalk and saw a few people on a balcony a few floors up smoking cigarettes and passing around a bottle of wine.

I hit the button with his apartment number. The front door buzzed, and I pushed it open. He was on the fifth floor by European count, which is the sixth floor to Americans like me. That seemed a little far to climb, so I tried the building's 1920s-style elevator.

After I pressed the elevator button, there was a scraping noise above me, and the elevator, which looked more like a rusty cage, came lurching down. By the time it finally landed, I thought, screw that, and I took the stairs.

I was covered in sweat when I got to his door, and I stood there for a minute before going in, wiping my face with my shirt and waiting for my breathing to slow down. I could hear voices inside, some laughter, and an old Rolling Stones' song playing on the stereo. When I was ready, I went back and forth over whether I should knock, or maybe just open the door, and I noticed a carving of a rudimentary phallus up near the top of the door. It looked like the ones in Pompeii.

Last time I was there, I saw a tour guide point out one of those phalluses to his group, telling them it meant there were male prostitutes inside the house. I wanted to say, sure, there were plenty of prostitutes – male and female – in Pompeii, but the phalluses had nothing to do with that. Those symbols were apotropaic; they were used to guard against the evil eye, bad luck – that kind of thing. The ancients were superstitious. And looking at Dario's door, I knew he was too.

I decided just to try the door without knocking. It was unlocked, and once I was in the entryway, the first thing I saw was a Roman centurion's armor and helmet displayed on a stand. It didn't look like just a showpiece. There were cuts in the leather breastplate, from a sword, maybe, and the helmet was dented in places.

Off the entryway to my left was the living room, filled with some people my age and older, but also with a big group of people in their twenties who had funky clothes and haircuts giving them a wild, artsy look.

The kitchen was to my right, which is the direction I went. I wanted a drink.

It was almost empty in there for some reason; I wondered if the artsy crowd was doing ecstasy and so they weren't really interested in drinking wine. There were a lot of unopened wine bottles on the counter. Also, standing in the corner, was a tall clay amphora with a ladle hooked on the rim. It looked mostly full.

I got excited, just seeing it there. I grabbed a wine glass out of the cupboard, went over to the amphora, and swirled the ladle around inside. It was like no wine I'd ever seen. The color was a very pale gold – almost silvery. I put my face close to the neck of the amphora, and as I swirled, I smelled ripe peaches and tart green apples.

I lifted the ladle to pour some into my glass when I felt a gentle touch on my shoulder. I turned and was looking at a woman with messy, salt-and-pepper hair and a thin arched Roman nose. She held up a clay pitcher and said, "*E piu fresco*."

I nodded, and she poured me a glass of this cooler wine, which I gathered she'd taken out of the amphora and chilled in the fridge.

I introduced myself in my rusty Italian, and we talked for a bit. She said her name was Elisabetta, and that she was the vintner working on the vineyard that belonged to Dario's uncle.

I thought she could tell I was hesitant to join the party. I always got nervous in groups, whether they were social gatherings or just my classes. When I was a first-time TA, I confided in the professor running the class that I sweated so heavily during my sections that I had huge sweat stains under my arms and on my back after each class. She told me two things: to always wear black, because the sweat doesn't show as much, and to put absorbent panty liners in my armpits. I've dressed that way for every class I've taught since.

I hadn't worn panty liners or black that day, though, and I think Elisabetta saw that I was sweaty and a little freaked out by all the people I didn't know; so she led me out of the kitchen to a small table for bites of prosciutto and melon. Some of the artsy young people were there, eating too. I found out quickly that they were actors – good looking and insecure and pretentious, but underneath that, there was a generosity that came across in the way they interacted, and a brave playfulness.

How do you get all that from spending only a few minutes with a couple people? I guess that's how you see people when you give them the benefit of the doubt. It was easy to do in that moment; I think the unusual wine I was drinking had something to do with that.

Each sip I took, I rolled around in my mouth for a while before swallowing it. The sensation was round and polished, and it was almost like getting a mouth massage. The taste reminded me of many things, but lemon was at the front of the pack; and the finish was like licking a smooth wet stone.

I heard Dario call out, "Hey Joe!" and saw him beckoning to me from a big, U-shaped couch in the adjoining room. As I approached, I could see Dario and a few other guys watching a fight on a big flat screen TV. It was one of those bare-knuckle cage fights with no rules beyond beating the living shit out of your opponent any way you could.

At least the fighters weren't using weapons, like the ones on the TV room walls. Just on the wall behind the part of the couch where I sat down, Dario had six different variations on the Roman short sword, or gladius. They were all deeply notched, which puzzled me at first; but then I figured they'd been used during the filming of a movie or TV show. The reason I thought so was that the actors at the buffet table had told me that Dario was involved in producing B movies, among his other business dealings.

Whether or not the armor in the entryway and the weapons on the walls were real in the sense that they'd drawn blood and broken bones, or if they were just movie props, they looked very authentic to me.

On the wall across from me were hung three spiked maces and a shining steel trident. Up to that point, I'd always thought of the trident as the weakest gladiator weapon along with the equally lame net that went with it, but the points on this trident were long, and looked surprisingly sharp.

Right behind Dario's head was a weapon I wasn't familiar with. It looked similar to a meat cleaver, except that the large blade was bent forward. It had a hand guard with spikes on it, like on a World War I trench knife.

In between Dario and me – occupying almost the entire curve of the U-shaped couch, was arguably the widest, most muscular person I've ever seen. He was named Ugo, and he was yelling out, "Aa-ooohhhh!" every time this particular fighter on TV – a giant, dark-skinned man in bloodstained white shorts – would get hit. Ugo was watching so intensely that he was involuntarily throwing half-punches, elbows and knees, and ducking in response to the dark-skinned fighter's attacks against his opponent on TV. I kept shifting away for fear of being hit,

but always began sliding back because Ugo was so heavy anyone even close to him on the couch was sinking toward him.

Dario was shouting, too, and trying to point out weaknesses that the dark-skinned fighter had. They called him Zingaro, a slur that means Gypsy. But Zingaro didn't look to me like he had any weaknesses. He won with a brutal knockout in round four.

He'd been pummeling his opponent's face, and you could see the poor guy start to wobble – he was definitely about to go down. But as he started to fall, Zingaro didn't just let him go down quietly; the big dark man took a leap – pulling back his fist as he did – and as his body came crashing toward his opponent who was now lying senseless on the mat, he drove his fist into the guy's face like a sledgehammer.

The ref moved in and pulled Zingaro off. Then he cupped the downed fighter's head like an EMT who thought there was a spinal injury. Zingaro was thumping his chest and roaring, and the commentators were going crazy – not with condemnation, but with excitement. As I watched, I was baffled by the level of insensitivity; but then I thought of it in terms I could understand: this is what the Colosseum must've been like, where Romans came to revel in the display of bravery, fighting prowess, and horrific violence – the core things, some would argue, that built the Empire and kept it strong for so many centuries.

Dario pointed to Ugo and said, "*Era per te, Ugo*." He was saying, "That was for you. For you." Then he added, in Italian, "Fucking Gypsy thinks he can scare you." Ugo sprang up, the couch groaning – and this surprisingly short block of a man (he looked almost wider than he was tall) started hitting himself in the head with his palms, making quick, forceful exhales as he did. Then he threw mighty punches, elbows, and kicks at the air with a horrible grimace on his face. He pointed at the TV and shouted, "*Per me? Per te! Vaffanculo, cazzo Zingaro!* –" The last part

of that means, Go fuck yourself up the ass, fucking Gypsy. He followed it up with, I'll knock your teeth out so you can blow me like your whore mother; and then he said he was going to mass murder every Gypsy in Rome and shit on their graves.

After all that, he stomped out onto the terrace to cool down, and Dario and I went into the kitchen to get more wine. While Dario was grabbing a clay pitcher out of the fridge, I asked him, "Ugo's going to fight Zingaro?"

Dario nodded. "In two month." He'd switched to English with me, in order to practice, I think. But that went out the window for good a little later that night.

"Two months?" I said. "Is he training for it now?"

"*Si si*," Dario said. "Everyday he train."

"He's brave," I said, "but he's also crazy to fight Zingaro. It looked like Zingaro really hurt that guy at the end of the fight. He was already down, there was no reason – "

Dario tapped his head. "Zingaro, he is smart. He give that to Ugo like eh –"

"Like a warning?" I offered.

"*Si, intimidazione*," Dario said. "But he don't know Ugo. Push him, and he push you more stronger. You say this, but he do that."

I said, "You think Ugo can win the fight, then?"

Dario took a breath and exhaled slowly, bobbing his head from side to side. "Zingaro, he is very fast. Big, strong – more than Ugo. But Ugo, he is, eh, *una roccia*. Rocky." Dario took a slight boxing stance, then he laughed, slapped me on the shoulder, and herded me toward the sliding glass door that led out onto the terrace.

Once we got out there, I'd expected to see Ugo out there, but the terrace was empty except for us.

"Where's Ugo?" I asked.

"I told you," Dario said, "He don't listen to nobody." He shrugged. "Maybe he, eh – he drink the raw eggs. Then he run up the stair at, eh – *il Campidoglio*."

He was talking about Michelangelo's stairway that went up to the top of the Capitoline Hill. I pictured Ugo running up them in gray sweats – getting stronger – then when he got to the top, jumping up and down in slow motion, his fists raised in triumph.

If Ugo actually *had* been up there on the Capitoline Hill, we almost could have seen him. The view of Rome from Dario's terrace was one of the best I'd seen, and I told him so.

"This view, *Gulio Cesare* gives to Cleopatra." Then he pointed at the floor of the terrace. "The villa he makes for her, it was here."

It's an old story. While there's general agreement among historians and archaeologists that Julius Caesar built a luxurious villa for Cleopatra to stay in while she was in Rome, no one knows exactly where it was. We know it was on the Janiculum Hill and had probably had amazing views of the city, so it *could* have been where Dario's building was, but the ridge of the Janiculum is very long and wide.

"Come on, Dario," I said. "You can't prove that. No one knows where the villa was."

He smiled. "I have the, eh – *i documenti*."

I gave him a look. "What documents?"

He turned around and whistled at one of the actors. The guy looked up, and Dario pointed at a pamphlet sitting on the coffee table. The actor smiled and brought it over to us.

On the cover was a picture of Elizabeth Taylor dressed as Cleopatra; and the title, spelled out in cheesy gold letters, said, *L'Appartamenti Via Garibaldi, 53: La Vita Lussa di Cleopatra.*

I said, "The Luxurious Life of Cleopatra? Nice tag line."

"You joke, but it sells many apartments, this book."

"You own the building?"

Dario gave a half nod. "My uncle."

Inside, the pamphlet had glossy photos of the same basic view we were looking at; the picture had probably been taken from the penthouse above us, which is where I figured his uncle lived.

I didn't want to ask, because the whole thing was making me sick. Especially the grainy black and white photo of two men with dirty, smiling faces who were pointing shovels at the base of an ancient column with a stylized Eye of Horus engraved into it.

I'd seen the photo before; it's part of a cautionary tale for academics. The picture was taken in 1870 during the renovation of a basilica at the bottom of the Janiculum Hill. When the basilica was originally built, during Constantine the Great's time, huge columns from Cleopatra's villa had been dragged down the Hill and used to make the church.

Fifteen hundred years later, the base of one of the columns was unearthed, exposing the engraved Eye of Horus. The church authorities supervising the renovation weren't sure what it was, so they called in two academics to take a look. The scholars matched it with symbols from temples to Isis, and while they were at it, they also identified symbols on columns inside the basilica proper as the faces of Isis and her consort Serapis, which had previously been thought to be saints' faces.

The pope at the time, Pius IX, ordered all the ancient symbols to be chiseled off the columns. One of the scholars protested the pope's actions vehemently; the other thought the pope had done the right thing. The scholars were both practicing Catholics. I don't know what the lesson is – be careful who you share your discoveries with? Maybe it just illustrates how huge

the umbrella of one religion can be, that such different points of view can fall inside a supposedly unified belief system.

Of course, I'm with the first scholar. Mutilating antiquities and trying to hide history seems to me to be a violation of sorts. I'm mad at dead Pope Pius for doing that, even though my anger accomplishes nothing. That's the way of the world, and what Pope Pius did was on a small scale – nothing like what's being done now to historical sites in Syria and Iraq, which is on the level of an antiquities holocaust.

I took what Dario had done in that pamphlet personally. It was more than just the principle. I don't want to go into it at length, because just thinking about it makes me crazy, but the whole reason my first book didn't get published was that the research underlying it was tainted by a hoax. The mafia had bribed an Italian archaeologist to write a few articles about a fabricated archaeological dig site in order to sell antiquities to rich collectors on the black market.

I'd read the articles, and extrapolated a "discovery" from certain irregularities in the site's ancient wine press – those irregularities became the foundation for my dissertation. Two years after I got the job at UCSB, the hoax was exposed, and the Italian archaeologist was sent to a Naples jail, but no mafia, you can guess why, were imprisoned. The incident wasn't reported much in the US, but it was fairly prominent in the Italian news for a week or two, during the archaeologist's trial. That's when I heard about it, in one of the worst phone calls of my life, from Peggy Talbot at Berkeley Press. She was so very sorry about having to cancel the publication of my book, which was basically done at that point.

She wondered if I'd had any inkling, if I'd seen any red flags, or if the hoax came as a complete surprise to me. Did I ever have the feeling that the articles seemed too good to be true?

There was an undercurrent of iciness in her words, even though she almost always maintained a very controlled, professional air.

When she'd first given me the book contract, she loved my research. "Wine is hot," she'd said. She expected my book to sell far more copies than your run of the mill academic book.

It might have; I don't know. But she was right about one thing: the winepress was too good to be true, and I admit that part of me was suspicious, but I wasn't going to go out of my way to question something that could make me stand out in an endless field of aspiring professors, all with the same dull, unimportant research. That's a bad excuse, I know that; and after it all happened, I became very cautious, afraid to move forward on projects. What if I was wrong about something? Or, what if I pushing ahead on a project, but it was rotten inside because I was doing it for the wrong reasons?

These are the things that came rushing into my head when I saw Dario's pamphlet. "You can't do this, Dario," I said. "You're telling people this building is where Cleopatra lived, and your evidence is a photo from the basement of Santa Maria in Trastevere. That's a mile away from here!"

"It is good marketing, this pamphlet," he said. Then he touched his chest. "In my *cuore*, I know it is true. Cleopatra and Giulio Cesare stand here with us and see out onto Roma like we do now."

I didn't say anything to that. I couldn't convince him of anything. I drank some wine and focused on the view – Cleopatra's view? Probably not, but it was still pretty. I felt the breeze on my face, and I looked out on the red terracotta roofs and endless church domes.

*

A couple hours later I was back on the enormous couch, drunk, chatting away with Elisabetta. (Maybe it was just coming back to me, but my Italian always seems to flow better when I'm drunk.) Dario was with us, too, and a couple of the actors who had stayed when the main group of them decided to go out to a bar. They'd half-heartedly tried to convince us to go with them, but none of us wanted to.

Not long after they left, Dario pulled a baggy out of his pocket with some brownish goo in it. He scooped a bit of it out with his finger, stuck it into his short wineglass, and swirled it around. When he was done, he tossed the bag to me.

"What is this?" I asked.

"*Oppio ottimo*," he said. He was drunk, too, and was playing around with the words. *Oppio* is opium, as you may have guessed, and *ottimo* just means great.

Elisabetta rolled her eyes and said, "*Oppio ozio*." *Ozio* means laziness.

"No, no," Dario said to her. Then he looked at me. "Tell her," he said.

"Tell her what?" I said.

"Tell her. Opium is a respectable medicine."

"But it's not," I said.

"It is!" he said, raising his glass, now filled with brownish, cloudy wine. "The greatest doctor of the ancient world gave it to the greatest emperor in his wine."

He was talking about Galen prescribing opium mixed with wine to Marcus Aurelius, who suffered from depression.

I nodded – at least I think I did – but I guess that wasn't the strong, vocal agreement he was looking for, because he said, "Fuck you, I'm not drinking with you anymore." Then he got up, drained his glass, and staggered into the kitchen.

Everyone laughed, and called out to him, "Come back!" which he eventually did, mostly because a young actor he'd had his eye on brought him back to the couch.

After he sat back down, Dario put his hand on the actor's muscular, hairy thigh, and pointed at me with his wine glass. "You gotta have some fun, man."

"I am having fun," I said.

"Not enough," he said.

"Fuck you, Dario," I said lazily.

"OK," he said, "I'll fuck some fun into you. As long as you're a bottom." He used the word, *buca* – hole. Apparently, he'd taken on the ancient Roman bias where it was socially acceptable for men to have sex with other men, but only if you were the one doing the penetrating, and being manly in that sense. When Dario said *buca*, he squeezed the actor's leg, and the young guy laughed along with some of the others in the room.

The opium, too, was getting passed around; everyone was taking a smudge of it on their finger and mixing it into with their wine. Even Elisabetta. When the person next to her gave her the baggy, she made a show of reluctance; but then she took some and everyone clapped.

She held out the baggy to me, and the way she was smiling gave me a little thrill. I took it, and said, "If it's good enough for Marcus Aurelius –"

Dario reassured me that it was *morbido*, soft, by which I think he meant the opium was mild. I was hoping that was what he meant, anyway. As I mixed the sticky brown paste into my wine, I asked if Dario could hook me up with some crank, too, because I was having trouble

working. He wanted to know what I meant by that, and I guess because I'd been drinking, the story of my tenure problem poured right out of my buca. My mouth buca, that is.

After I'd gone on for probably much too long, Elisabetta said, "The gods will help you," then she looked at Dario meaningfully.

Dario nodded. "You must sacrifice to them with us at the *Vinalia*."

"The *Vinalia Rustica*?" I said. "You're celebrating that?"

"*Certo*," Dario said. "Without the gods' blessing, nothing grows, nothing lives, and we are cursed."

The *Vinalia Rustica* was a festival the ancient Romans held every year on August 19th. They would sacrifice to Jove, the king of the gods, and pray for him to grant them a bountiful grape harvest, and for good fortune.

I started picturing what the celebration might be like. There would have to be someone acting as *flamens*, the high priest of Jove, and whoever that was would preside over a ritual, blood sacrifice.

I asked, "Who is the *flamens*?"

Dario stared for a second and said, "You, *professore*."

"Me?"

"Yes," he said. "I think your Latin is better than mine. More authentic. And I think you need to be very close to the sacrifice, to the god, if you want to save your career."

I remember thinking it was funny – the whole notion of it. "Sure, I'll fucking do it," I said, "but I can't see how Jove can help me. I could use some luck, yes, but I need more than that. I can't move. I can't fucking *move*."

Dario laughed. "You're high, *professore pazzo*." *Pazzo* means crazy.

Maybe he was right that the opium was coming on, or I was just really drunk, but I could *feel* how stuck I was, and had been for a long time. It wasn't just not being able to run down the Bunny Hill with the hang glider; it wasn't just the backwards line at the *Archivio*; it was deeper than that, at the bottom of some black chasm that I couldn't name. None of that makes sense, I know, but that's the best I can describe how I felt.

"I can't move," I said again.

Then I felt something very sharp jab into the back of my neck, and I jumped up. I let out a screech and twisted around. Ugo was standing there behind the couch with the trident in his hand. He said, "You can move."

"*Fuck*, *Ugo*," I said, holding my neck. There was laughter. But it wasn't funny to me, because when I looked at my hand, there was blood on it.

"You can move," Ugo said. "You can do any impossible thing if you have fear biting your ass."

"You cut me," I said.

"Listen to Ugo," Dario said. "He's fucking crazy, but he's wise, too."

"What your best fear?" Ugo said.

"What do you mean?" I said.

Dario said, "He means, what's the most terrible thing that could ever happen to you?"

I stood there for second, thinking. Everyone was looking at me, and I don't know if this was real or just the opium, or if my memory of it is accurate or not, but I felt like they were on my side. Like they were giving me warmth – even Ugo. Him especially. Or maybe it was just the high. I wish I knew.

I'm not trying to be funny when I say that the other feeling I became aware of was a serious urge to pee. I hadn't noticed it before that, but once I did, I had to go bad. But I couldn't just go to the bathroom right then while everyone was waiting for me to answer, so I blurted out the first thing that came into my head, which was something that Suetonius had written about in his history, *The Lives of the Caesars*. I didn't remember the passage verbatim, of course, but Suetonius had recounted basically that the Emperor Tiberius, who was obviously deranged, had invented his own torture: he would be at a banquet, say, drinking, and if anyone criticized the wine he served (he was known to be miserly, so the wine was most likely poor, much of the time), or if they displeased him in some other way, he would have them bound up in a chair and he would force them to drink a full amphora of wine. That's about seven gallons. And as the poor man was guzzling wine, Tiberius would tie a lute string around the man's penis, pull it tight and knot it so the man, no matter how badly he needed to, *couldn't pee*.

In describing it, I horrified myself, because I could feel the extreme need, right then, to pee. I saw a couple people wince, but they didn't take it seriously, and laughed afterward. But Dario loved it. After I finished, he started clapping and burst out with, "*Perfetto, professore – bravo, bravo!*"

I took a couple steps toward the bathroom, but Ugo was in my way. He said something like, "This torture will save you," or, "It'll make you a man," but things are foggy in my head about exactly what his words were.

I told him I had to go to the bathroom, but it seemed like his body got wider each time I tried to get by him; but it didn't feel like he was trying to block me – his huge body was enveloping me, and I could smell his sweat, and Dario was saying how sacrifice was this beautiful thing that made life out of death. That, of course, put a picture in my head of me as part

of the sacrifice, but then no – that was stupid, that was too much like one of the B movies he was supposedly making. And it was so warm in there, and for a second I thought I had pissed in my pants; and I didn't care even if I had. Because Dario and Ugo and I were hugging each other, like in a football huddle, and for some reason I felt the awakening of hope – that maybe I could finally be free and move, even fly – and we were yelling, calling upon *Giove divino* to hear us, swearing to him the great and courageous things that we would do in his name.

It wasn't just hope anymore, it was euphoria – the whole room was exploding – everyone was hugging and then my face was up against Elisabetta's – she had that beautiful smile, and we kissed; there was lurching around and we were in another room with a flaking ancient fresco covering one of the walls. It looked so real, but it couldn't be; I'd seen it in the Pompeii baths: a woman on her knees licking another woman who was blowing a man with another man behind him, thrusting away.

Chapter 7

When I woke up, I was back on the couch, with one of the actor's feet in my face. I looked at my phone – it was past 1pm, and I had several missed calls and texts from Larissa. Her last one said, "Are you alive?" *Fuck*. Just when things were starting to go well there, I thought, but I'd make it up to them tonight. I was groggy and my fingers weren't working properly – was that the opium? I had no idea. Eventually, I was able to send her a text saying how sorry I was, especially to Zara, and could we make dinner tonight?

While I waited for her response, I stumbled into the bathroom and felt unusually happy about having the luxury of relieving my bladder. That brought memories of the night thudding into my consciousness. I'd sworn to accept Tiberius' torture if I didn't get the book contract – but how were Dario and Ugo going to know? If I failed, I could just lie to them about it. But even as I thought that, something inside me deflated. I'd felt so good the night before, something more than just the *oppio*. I'd felt brave like Ugo, I'd felt part of something powerful and exciting, something that made me capable of surmounting impossible odds. There was magic to it, a sacredness. And the prospect of lying my way out of it made me sad, like I'd lost something.

But my head was still cloudy and I couldn't figure the whole thing out there in the bathroom, so I followed the smell of coffee into the kitchen.

Ugo was nowhere to be seen, but Dario was in there, shirtless, making a frittata with his boyfriend, and Elisabetta was turning nobs on the kitchen's industrial espresso machine.

It was awkward, seeing everyone after the things that'd happened the night before. Especially with Elisabetta. I stood there dumbly for a second, not knowing what to do, but when she saw me, she kissed both my cheeks – you know, how the Italians do – but she let her face linger next time afterward. Then she asked if I wanted a coffee and of course I was dying for one. While she was making it, we kept glancing at each other and smiling. She looked so refreshed and beautiful, and I felt so mellow from the opium that I kind of melted into a chair while she steamed a little milk for my coffee.

Dario had started rattling off in Italian to me, something about an email, while he was cracking eggs, and I thought I might be missing something, because my Italian seemed to be much worse than it had been the night before. He kept telling me to check my email; I finally did, and was horrified to see one from Peggy Talbot, replying curtly that, yes, she was available to Skype at 1pm Pacific Time on August 19th.

I quickly scrolled down and saw that I had sent her an email at 3:23am. Shit, I thought, that wasn't good; she probably thought I was drunk when I sent it. It said:

Hey Peggy, ciao from Rome. You should be here! Can you Skype on August 19th? That's a really good day for me. Day for you, night for me. Maybe 1pm California time? I'll send you the book proposal a week before then, and we can talk all about it, and all about everything that's happening with you in your life. And don't worry. This is nothing like last time. This book's going to work out great.

Ciao ciao, carissima!

Joe

OK, I thought, it could be worse, but it was still bad. While I was cringing, Dario grabbed my phone from over my shoulder, stared at it, and tossed it back to me. "*Bene, bene,*" he said. "I like your Peggy."

But from my perspective, nothing was *bene*. The darkness had suddenly closed in again. I said, "August 19th? That's less than a month. I don't even know where to start."

Dario laughed and said, "I'll show you where."

*

Three coffees and two slices of frittata later, I was sitting in the back seat of Dario's old Mercedes, next to his dirty gym clothes and what looked like the accumulation of a few month's worth of garbage. I kept running my tongue over the film on my teeth from all the wine and coffee. I'd asked Dario to stop at Larissa's for a couple minutes so I could clean up, but he'd pretended he couldn't hear me over the music. He and Elisabetta had been singing along with Beach Boys songs, and every time I asked, he just sang louder.

After a while, Elisabetta turned her head and said, "Santa Barbara – what's it like?"

"Come visit," I said. "I'll take you surfing."

She laughed. "You want to take us on a surfing safari in Santa Barbara?" The alliteration wasn't quite so extreme in Italian.

Dario whooped. "Surfing safari!"

"I don't really know how to surf," I admitted.

"*Non c'e problema*," Dario said. "We can all take lessons from beautiful surfer boys."

Through the window, I saw us passing under the massive, crumbling archway of the ancient city wall. We'd entered the neighborhood of Testaccio, which gets its name from *testa* and *cocci*, both meaning potshard.

The ancients used the area as a garbage dump. It was close enough to be convenient, but a little outside the walls so the stink wouldn't pollute the city. It's an insult to call it a dump, actually. The Romans placed their garbage methodically. They constructed wooden terraces which they filled with broken clay amphorae. Eventually, the layers stacked up into a hill over a hundred and fifty feet high. That hill – Monte Testaccio – still stands in the middle of the neighborhood, surrounded by good restaurants and tall, old apartment buildings.

Dario parked illegally on a street bordering Monte Testaccio, but neither he nor Elisabetta seemed concerned, so I didn't say anything. We got out into the hot sun and started climbing the grassy, uneven surface of the hill.

There were a few archaeological digs in progress in Monte Testaccio, and I figured we were headed to one of those. I was breathing heavily, climbing the hill, but managed to say (between breaths), "Do you know one of the archaeologists digging up here?"

"My niece," Dario answered. "She was digging here in the spring."

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know you had an archaeologist in the family."

"Soon," he said. "She has one more year at University."

"What's her name?"

Dario stopped and turned toward me. "Why do you want to know her name?"

"I was just – "

"She has nothing to do with this anymore. You never heard of her. *Capito*?"

I looked over at Elisabetta who said, "Don't be so dramatic, Dario. She's not going to get in any trouble."

"That's right," he said. "She won't get in any trouble. She'll finish school and get a good job. "

"OK," I said. "So what we're about to do is definitely illegal."

"Don't worry your pretty head, *professore buca*."

"Fuck you, Dario," I said. "If this is some *tombaroli* shit, I don't want anything to do with it."

He bared his teeth at me. "And what's wrong with the *tombaroli*?"

"What's wrong with robbing tombs and archaeological sites? It's stealing history; that's what's wrong with it," I said.

Dario threw up his hands. "From who? The British Museum? The Met in New York?"

I said, "You think that's an excuse? Because foreigners have taken things? They have, you're right, but at least those museums show what they have to the public, and they're returning the antiquities they got illegally –"

"Bullshit!" Dario shouted. "How many treasures have not been returned? And will never be?"

"Things are improving," I said. "Everything goes to the Italian government now."

He snorted. "Where do think it goes after that? The Italian government is the most corrupt *mafia* of all."

"But Dario, when the government is involved, archaeologists get to catalogue everything. We learn something. But when a *tombarolo* digs something up, the site gets destroyed, and any knowledge that could have come from it is lost."

"Nothing is lost," he said. "The treasures go where they should – to the Italian people. Not the Americans, not the British, not my bullshit government."

"So," I said, "you share what you find with all your people?"

He flipped his fingernails off the bottom of his chin. "*Vaffanculo*," he said venomously. Then he turned and started trudging up the hill.

I looked at Elisabetta. "Whatever he's got up there should be studied properly and put in a museum."

"I don't want to offend you," she said, "but I hate museums. They're fake."

"Well," I started, "they can feel a little false sometimes. But when they're properly –"

"Shhhhh," she said, putting her finger to her lips. Then she whispered, "Come with me, and see the real thing."

*

I was horribly conflicted, but of course I had to go. I had to see.

We followed after Dario, and when we'd climbed nearly to the hill's peak, we saw him waiting for us in front of a slatted iron gate set into the side of the hill. There was someone next to him, a small man in a rumpled suit. I saw Dario pass him a pack of cigarettes; the man looked inside, and stuffed it in his coat pocket. Then he got out a ring of keys and opened the padlock on the gate.

Dario pulled on the creaking gate, and a dark tunnel opened in front of us. He picked up a camping lantern just inside the gate and started fumbling around with it while Elisabetta walked

past him. Then, as I bent my head and went past him into the low tunnel, he joked, “The dark side welcomes you.”

As the bald man was closing the door behind us, the narrowing shaft of sunlight shone on crushed cans and old Peroni bottles.

I asked Elisabetta if homeless people had lived in the tunnels.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Teenagers used to party on top of the hill, though, until they closed it off.”

The door slammed shut, and there was darkness, followed by a burst of glossy white light from behind us as Dario finally got the lantern turned on. He said, “Monte Testaccio used to be a park, for all the people to use, until the asshole mayor closed it. It’s our fucking land. What right does he have to take it from us?”

“*Basta*, Dario,” Elisabetta said.

I looked at the tightly packed clay shards making up the wall. “These tunnels weren’t part of the park, though, were they?”

“No, no,” Dario said, passing by us with the swinging lantern. “The kids just threw their bottles through the gaps in the door. You see now, here, there are no more bottles.”

We followed Dario down the tunnel, and it got cooler as we went along. Little gusts of wind hit us each time we passed other tunnels that opened out to the left and right, all of them slanting sharply downward. Dario counted each opening out loud as we went by them, and when he triumphantly counted twelve, *Dodici!*, he thrust the lantern into a thin passage that I could barely see until I was standing in front of it. Dario winked at me, then turned sideways and slipped into it, and Elisabetta went next.

They were both skinnier than I was, and so they moved much faster through the passageway than I did. I kept feeling like I was cutting my back and stomach on the old pottery shards that made up the wall, although I couldn't tell how bad the scrapes were, because I'd fallen behind and there was no light.

"*Aspetta!*" I called out, but there were several turns, and I was making so much noise with my breathing and crunching on the shard floor that I couldn't hear how far away they were, and didn't know if they'd heard me call out for them to wait.

My right knee started to hurt; probably because each step was lower than the last, and it was taking the brunt of my weight. I couldn't see anything, so I stopped and reached slowly down to get out my phone. I turned on the phone's flashlight, but all I could see was the shard wall in front of my face, the low curved ceiling, and another turn up ahead.

I started again, inching sideways down the passage. "Elisabetta?" I called, but there was no answer. Could they have ditched me? Did they want me to die down here because I thought the *tombaroli* were wrong? I started panicking. "Elisabetta!"

Nothing.

Then I heard Elisabetta's voice. "Joe, *cosa fai*?"

"I'm just resting for a minute," I said.

"Come here, you silly man," she said from the darkness.

I pointed my phone's light at her, and she squinted. "OK," I said, and started moving toward her. When I got close enough, she took my hand and together we shuffled along until I could see the glow of Dario's lantern up ahead. And I thought, thank God, there's a room up ahead.

But there was no room. It was just Dario standing in the narrow passageway, leaning back against some ratty pillows that were somehow fastened to wall. The area had a slightly more spacious feel, though, because of the three rough shelves dug into the wall Dario was facing.

Dario had set the lantern on the middle shelf, about waist high, next to several small shovels and other tools, as well as a metal rod poking out from the wall. Everything was covered in white powder. The powder, I knew, was lime; the Romans used it to cover their trashed olive oil amphorae in order to dampen the smell of the rancid oil.

"OK," I said, "you've got lots of broken olive oil amphorae here. Is there something I should be looking at?" There was probably an edge to my voice. I was feeling claustrophobic and would very much have preferred to be in a big, dull museum with spacious rooms, and lots of exits.

"There are wine amphorae, too," Dario said. "Very special." He dragged a powdery canvas sheet off the front of the shelf, and underneath it was an intact, reddish amphora still halfway embedded into the lip of the shelf. It was very unusual: there was a sculpted relief on the amphora's underside of a woman's face. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth was parted in a sensual, almost ecstatic expression. Behind, and on top of her, the relief continued as the face of a man with a crown of grapes over his flowing hair. His face was turned to the side, toward us, and he seemed to stare out in a kind of invitation.

"Bacchus and Ariadne," I said.

"*Si*," Elisabetta said, running her hand along Bacchus' face. "I wish I could taste the wine from this amphora. I think it was *love-lava*." That's my bad translation, but she may have meant a few things by using the Italian word *lava*, which can mean: any liquid; the water you use to

clean things; the state of being clean; or, just – literally the same as in English – lava from a volcano. Maybe she meant some combination of these things.

I reached for the lantern and bent down – favoring my good knee – so I could get a look at the lowest shelf. All the amphorae down there were broken, but some of the pieces were large. The biggest fragment, the upper third or so of an amphora, had especially long handles that resembled legs that had been spread apart and bent. In between them was an unmistakable sculptural rendering of an open vagina in place of the usual cylinder-shaped amphora mouth.

Elisabetta, crouching next to me, said, "The wine that amphora birthed must have been loved by all who drank it."

Dario, above us, said, "Elisabetta, it's just a container, not a fucking womb."

While she shrugged off the comment, I was marveling. Dario was wrong, these were more than just containers. I'd seen plenty of decorated amphorae before – usually just painted with a simple scene from mythology. But I hadn't seen anything like this.

The ancients made amphorae, almost always, in a strictly uniform shape, partly so they could be easily stacked and therefore shipped cheaply and safely. The ones in front of me had to have been individually packed, not to mention individually sculpted – in some artists' workshop, it looked like.

"Someone paid a lot of money for these," I said.

"Yes," Dario said. "And they will pay even more now."

I stood up. "You can't sell these, Dario. They're important."

"I'm not selling them. Not yet," he said. "How can I know what to charge until I find out what they are?"

I said, "And you expect me to do that for you?"

Elisabetta was standing up again, caressing the Ariadne and Bacchus amphora. She said, "We're still taking this one to the vineyard, yes?"

"*Certo*," Dario said. "Calm down, everyone. We'll sell a little, and we'll keep a little. We may even leave something behind for the museum."

"Dario," I said, "you can't –"

"Stop worrying," he said. "We'll talk about it later. I promise to compromise."

"You do?" I knew he couldn't be trusted, but maybe I could make him budge without having to call the police or – oh, God, I couldn't do that, could I?

I felt him looking at me. He said, "Will you stop worrying? We'll figure out a solution that will make everyone happy. Let me show you the rest; then we'll go have a drink, and talk."

"Shit," I said, and Dario laughed. I picked up the lantern and lifted it as high as I could, getting up on my tiptoes to peer onto the highest shelf. I saw a fragment that – well, it was hard to describe. "Is that some kind of a – a half man, half sheep?"

"Yes," Elisabetta agreed. "Like a satyr, but he is a lamb instead of a goat."

I craned my neck forward and squinted at the amphora, which was on its side, with its top facing us. The handles were small and shaped like a lamb's ears, and the head was sculpted so that it looked like it was thrown back so that the mouth of the amphora was basically a large oval slit in the front of the lamb's neck.

"Whoa," I said. "I'm not sure I'd want to drink whatever wine came out of this."

"I would," Elisabetta said. "The contours of the clay always shape the wine inside, squeezing here, swelling there. This, I think, was a generous wine."

Dario groaned. "Betta, you're talking crazy. You can't taste the shape of the container! This design was to sell the wine for more money. It was only for show, for marketing."

"Yes," Elisabetta said, "everything is done only for money. Money money money."

Dario said, "What's wrong with money? The winemaker who made this was a *businessman*. He wasn't generous and neither was his wine. But I bet he was fucking rich." He reached up for the lantern and brought it back down in front of the middle shelf. Then he pointed at the handle on the Bacchus-Ariadne amphora. "Look, there's his stamp. A strong stamp, made by a rich man."

I looked at the handle. It was engraved with the letters SID PMP.

"Well," I said, "PMP is probably short for the winemaker's last name – maybe Pompeius or Pompeia – those were pretty common last names. But the SID – I don't know. Maybe it's an abbreviated first name, like Sido. I'll have to – wait," I said, moving the lantern closer. There was a chipped symbol just below the winemaker's name that had also been stamped into the clay.

Dario laughed. "I was wondering how long it would take you. It's a fucking *Chi-Rho,* man."

I said, "You sure?"

"That one's not so good," he said. "But look on all the other handles. The bottom ledge has the clearest ones, but they're everywhere – all three levels. Just look."

I bent down with the lantern, and there it was, stamped into three or four amphora handles, just below the winemaker's name.

I don't know that much about Late Antiquity – High Empire is my specialty – but even I knew that *Chi* and *Rho* are the first two letters, in Greek, of the name Christ. The *Chi* (from the Greek alphabet) looks like our X but sounds like our K. The *Rho* looks like a P, but gives an R

sound. You lay the P on the X and you've got a *Chi-Rho* symbol, which is most famous for being the symbol that Constantine took as his own just after he converted to Christianity.

"OK," I said, standing up, "there's probably a connection here to Christianity, but I don't know how to date any of this. Did you find anything else? I have to talk to your niece – she's the one who's been digging here, right?"

"Nobody's been digging here," Dario said.

Elisabetta put her lips close to my ear and said, "Niece Nobody." (*Nipote Nessuna*.)

"Shut up," Dario said.

I said, "Niece Nobody dug all this? I have to know how she found it, and everything else about the place." I pointed at the little rod poking out of the wall. "Like, what's this for?"

Dario grabbed the lantern and started sidestepping down the tunnel.

I said to Elisabetta, "Is he leaving because he's pissed off? Or are we supposed to follow him?"

She started moving down the passage. "Come on," she said. "There's something else to see."

I followed. The passage took a sharp turn, widening a little, and I was hit by another waft of cool air. As I approached the place where Dario stood holding the lantern, I saw that the air was coming through a brick-sized hole in the wall.

When I reached him, he said, "Look through here."

The hole opened into a big room with a shaft in the ceiling that was letting in sunlight. There were protective foam planks on the floor and wooden beams supporting the ceiling and walls, which were wired with light bulbs.

"This is the place where your niece – where Nobody was working with the archaeologists?"

"What do you think?" Dario said testily. "Just look at the left wall, then we can leave."

"I am," I said. "OK, I see the rods. What did you guys do, hammer those things through the wall?"

"A *tomborolo* trick," Dario said, "that the archaeologists could learn from."

"That's a shitty trick," I said. "God knows what you damaged."

"*Madonna mia*," Dario cried in a singsong voice. "You think the archaeologists don't destroy? They don't care about my land or my people, or the traditions that put these treasures here. They only care about their petty little fucking careers, just like *you*."

Elisabetta said, "The archaeologists Dario hates so much dated each layer." She put her hand on my shoulder. "Do you see the markers?"

"Yes," I said, "way off to the side." In the dim light coming from the ceiling, I could see cards along the wall, marking the different strata. I lined up the cards with the rods poking through the wall.

"All right, the year each shelf corresponds to is, ah – "

"312, 315, and 326," Dario said impatiently. "Now let's go. I'm hungry."

I turned around and looked at him. "But I need to take pictures, and –"

"I have pictures already," Dario said. "I'm going to use them to make a pamphlet."

Chapter 8

After we got out of the tunnels, we had a drink and some snacks at a bar across the street from Monte Testaccio. Dario told me what more he knew about the *Chi-Rho* amphorae, and promised to forward me his photos and an unpublished report about the legal archaeological dig – one that his niece had apparently gotten while she working there in the spring. I was hoping the dig director's name and contact information would be on the report; I might want to tell him or her what was going on at the site – although I wasn't sure how I was going to handle things yet.

Elisabetta, and less-enthusiastically, Dario, asked me if I wanted to come stay at the vineyard – they were driving up that evening – but although I wanted to spend more time with Elisabetta, I really needed to get back to Larissa's house.

They dropped me off in the Campo, where I picked up some fresh pasta and aged Pecorino – as well as milk, eggs, bread and some other things – so my arms were full of bags when I finally walked into Larissa's. No one was in the kitchen, but I heard music from upstairs, so I followed it up to Zara's room. Her door was open, and I peeked inside; she was drawing at her desk, and her head was bobbing to the upbeat Italian pop song coming from her computer.

"Hey," I said.

She looked up.

"Sorry about missing dinner last night," I said. "I got, ah – caught over at my friend's house."

"That's OK," she said.

"You want to cook tonight?"

"Yeah," she said.

I couldn't read her tone, so said, "You sure? Because if you'd rather hang out with your friends or something, that's OK, too. I'd understand."

She shook her head. "All my friends are gone for the summer. I mean, the good ones are."

"Really? Where'd they go?"

She looked up. "Jake's in Nantucket. Ella's in, um, I think she's back in New York now. And Leroy's in Seattle."

I nodded, thinking that sounded about right for rich kids going to a private American school in Rome. "I know it's early," I said, "but I'm hungry. You want to cook now? Or maybe should we wait for your mom?"

She told me she was hungry, too, and that since Larissa wouldn't be back for a couple hours at least, we should cook now.

I went back toward the kitchen – I was halfway down the wobbling circular stairs when I noticed Zara wasn't behind me. I took a few steps back up and saw her standing in her bedroom doorway, lightly kicking the doorframe with the toe of her shoe.

I stood there for a moment, and then I said, "You OK up there?"

She frowned at me. "Now I have to start over."

"Shit," I said. "Sorry. I'll see you downstairs."

I got a pot of water on the stove, and was grating the pecorino when she came into the kitchen. "Do you think I'm crazy?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"My mom does."

"She doesn't think you're crazy. She's just worried about you. But – " I hesitated to go on, because, what did I really know about it? But I said what I was thinking anyway.

"I'm not sure if it's the same thing or not," I said. "Maybe you can tell me. But people have been – well, we've been using rituals since as far back as anyone knows to try to bring some kind of stability to this incomprehensible, uncontrollable thing we call life. If anything's crazy, it's the world we live in. Not you."

She stood there, looking at me. Then she went into one of the cupboards and started rummaging around.

I said, "What do you think? Is that at all how you see the things that you, ah – "

"I don't know, maybe," she said lightly, pulling a big pan out of the cupboard and putting it on the stove. "Put the cheese in here," she said, firing up the second burner.

"How'd you turn that on so easy?" I said. "I can never get that thing to work."

"You have to turn the nob *all* the way over," she said.

"But that's what I do," I said. "I think, anyway."

She snorted a little laugh as she plugged her phone into the speakers sitting on the far end of the counter. Then another song, like the one I'd heard in her room, came on – upbeat pop with raspy Italian vocals. I asked the name of the singer – "*Barbone*," she said, or something like that. It was hard to tell over the music, which she danced around to while she set the table.

When the water started to boil, Zara told me to ladle some of it into the pan with the cheese in it. She added black pepper to that and was stirring it while I put the pasta into the boiling water.

The fresh pasta cooks fast – and a few minutes later, I strained it and put it in the pan. Zara mixed it in with the cheesy-pepper sauce, and soon we were at the table stuffing our faces.

In between mouthfuls, she said, "What did you do last night? Did you meet a girl at that party?"

"Yeah," I said.

She tilted her head. "What's she like?"

"She's, ah – I don't really know her that well, to tell you the truth."

"You must know something about her." She smiled. "I bet you know *a lot* about her."

"Not really," I said. "I know she makes really good wine. And that she's kind of a rebel."

"Like what she does she do, go protest the government in Piazza del Popolo?"

"She protests museums," I said.

Zara laughed. "How do you know *that*? Did you try to take her on a date to a museum or something?"

"That would definitely be my dream date," I said. "But no, we went into some tunnels to see ancient garbage, instead."

"You mean in Monte Testaccio?"

"Yeah," I said. "Have you been there?"

"On a field trip," she said, twirling her pasta. "We went inside where the archaeologists were. It was fun."

"You went in there? When did you do that?"

"It was forever ago," she said. "I was in like sixth grade."

"Oh." Then I thought for a second, and said, "You didn't see anything unusual in there, did you?"

"Like what?"

"Amphorae shaped like people, or animals."

She said, "They showed us their tools, and how they used them. And they told us how important olive oil was. But everything looked the same – just piles of broken pottery everywhere." She took a big bite of pasta, and said, "Why? You see something weird down there?"

I got up, went into the fridge and pulled out a half-full wine bottle out of the door. While I was pouring myself a glass, Zara said, "You found something, didn't you! What was it?"

"I probably shouldn't say anything," I said.

"Why?"

"I don't want to get you into any trouble. Or me."

"But I'm your *assistant*," she said. "And I won't say anything to anyone."

"I trust you," I said, "but –"

She leaned over her plate. "How bout if you tell me only the stuff that can't get anyone in trouble. I bet there's lots of that. It'll be like a – a double blind study."

"A what?"

"You know," she said, "like where the person who's studying the thing doesn't know anything that would make them study it in ways that make the, um, the conclusions all messed up. We could do something like that, right?"

"I don't know," I said. But she could see I was starting to cave, so she went in for the kill.

"All you have to do," she said, "is tell me the stuff you want me to research for you, but you don't have to say why you want me to do it, or, like, what you're looking for exactly, and then I'll just be looking things up without knowing anything like, dangerous, and then no one'll get in trouble."

"Fine, all right," I said. "But I'm only going to tell you a little bit. And you have to be satisfied with that. You can't hound me about wanting to know more than I tell you. OK?"

"I swear," she said. "Cross my heart."

I sat back down with my wine and told her the things I wanted her to research. I didn't say anything about Dario, of course, or of the illegal dig, but I showed her a few the pictures of the *Chi-Rho* amphorae that Dario had emailed to me.

When I told her the years they were buried, in order to guide her research, she asked, "What happened in 312, 315, and 326?"

"312," I said, "is the year Constantine the Great had his vision at the Milvian Bridge and became Christian. But 315 and 326 – those dates don't mean anything special to me."

She swiveled around in her chair and grabbed her computer off the counter. "I'll look it up."

She typed a few words on the keyboard and then turned it so we could both see the screen. "315," she started to read, but I stopped her.

"No Wikipedia," I said.

"What's so bad about Wikipedia?"

"It's not a reputable site. I don't allow any of my students to use it."

"Don't be snobby," she said, and started reading from the website again. "315. The Arch of Constantine is completed near the Colosseum at Rome to commemorate Constantine's victory

over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge. As part of the ceremony Constantine is expected to make a sacrifice to Rome's traditional gods, but he refuses to do so. Constantine dedicated the Basilica of Maxentius and installs a large statue of himself inside –"

"*There*," I said, "you see what I mean? They just mixed up the tenses. There's no quality control in Wikipedia."

"Can I finish?" she said. "Please."

"OK," I said. "But after this, you're only going to use primary sources and peer-reviewed articles and books. You know how to find those?"

"I know, I know," she groaned. "You sound like my mom."

"All right," I said. "You can finish this page, but after that you're going cold turkey on Wikipedia."

She made a face at me and turned back to the screen. "Crucifixion is abolished as punishment in the Roman Empire. Eusebius becomes bishop of Caesarea. The lamb becomes the symbol of Jesus in Christian art."

"Not one citation on that page," I said. "Terrifying."

"So what?" Zara said. "It's a good, you know, summary of what happened that year. What do you think it means for the weird amphorae?"

"One thing it means," I said, "is that Constantine was here in Rome for the dedication of his triumphal arch in 315, the year the amphorae on the middle shelf were buried."

"But he was Emperor," Zara said. "Wasn't he here, like, always?"

"No," I said, "I'm pretty sure the first time he was here in Rome was when he came to conquer it – at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. And I don't think he stayed long after that, but I don't know for sure."

She looked at me like, *you don't know?*

I often get that look from students when I don't know the answer to a question. If they thought for a second about how massive the ancient world is – if you can even consider something so huge a single area of study – they wouldn't wonder.

And it's not just the scope of the ancient world; historians, like most people, are very specialized in their work. When you're in grad school working on your dissertation, the pressure is on to do something new; and since so much has already been done, you search for your new discovery by drilling a long needle down into one era; then you focus in on a narrow segment of the religion, say, or the economy of that period; and you pick apart one detail of someone famous' theory related to that particular segment of society during that particular period, hoping to chip away a tiny little niche for yourself.

The tinier, the better, because there's a mistrust of ambitious ideas in academia – probably for good reason, because, if you think you know something big that everyone else has somehow missed over all these years, you're probably wrong, or deluded. So professors, like most people, have to be content with tinkering.

Of course, that whole approach – the whole system – might be needlessly oppressive and driven more by the need to protect, than to learn.

*

The next day, Zara and I walked up to the Academy.

Once we'd gotten our sweaty selves inside the library, Zara said, "What do you want me to do, find stuff on Constantine? Or are we still doing Vesuvius?"

I hesitated to answer. Part of me was afraid to abandon the Vesuvius angle, even though it had been a dead end so far, because pursuing the *Chi-Rho* amphorae could be even worse and lead me right off a cliff.

Even if I could identify the winemaker, SID PMP, and find references to other amphorae like the ones Niece Nobody had found, a huge problem remained: I couldn't cite things found at an illegal dig.

But even as I thought that, I questioned it. Could I cite things found outside official channels as evidence?

The idea was risky; the legal complications were scary; and if I spent my remaining few weeks of research time on this and it went nowhere, I wouldn't have time to do anything else. It was my last chance.

Still, it was exciting. Seeing the *Chi-Rho* amphorae like that, unspoiled in a sense (and totally spoiled in another) – I was dying to find out what they were. It was fun – a word I hadn't applied to my job or my life nearly often enough.

So I said to Zara, "You hunt down Constantine; that'll give us some context. And I'll see what I can find out about those amphorae. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good, boss," she said, starting up the aisle.

"Primary sources," I called after her, "and peer-reviewed articles!"

"I know, I know," she said.

While she was chasing Constantine, I was going through *Notizie degli Scavi* (excavation reports), starting, of course, with all the things that have been dug up in Testaccio over the years.

Some of the reports have been digitized. This is a big ongoing project for the Academy, which it's doing in conjunction with other libraries and archives, but even with the digitized journals, I ended up having to search through them manually. This is because the photos and drawings rarely come with specific descriptions, that is, anything that would come up in a keyword search.

So I spent an increasing amount of time in the vault-like little room where they keep the original journals. Not that I minded, in certain ways. I love the feeling and smell of old books; I got a charge out of reading the hand-scripted notes and looking through the attached sketches and photos – in a few cases, original daguerreotypes from the 1840s.

I spent the whole day in that room.

In the evening, while Zara and I were cooking, Larissa called. Zara talked to her for a while, then passed the phone over to me.

"Hi, Joe? You there?" Larissa said.

"Yes, hi, Larissa," I said. I could hear noise in the background. It sounded like she was in a crowded restaurant or a bar.

"Joe, are you there?"

"I'm here, Larissa. How's Florence?"

"What?"

"How's Florence?" I said louder.

"Good," she said. "And how is Zara doing? You guys getting along, and staying out of trouble?" I must've frowned, because Zara, who was watching my face while she peeled eggplant for the caponata we were attempting to make, started laughing.

"Everything's fine, Larissa. Are you coming back tonight?"

"Well," she said, with clanking glasses and jumbled conversations crowding her voice, "I wanted to ask if you could keep an eye on her for the next few days. A, ah, colleague of mine is driving up to Ravenna tomorrow, and I thought I might tag along."

"Oh," I said. "Yes, of –"

"I've been meaning to get up there for ages," she continued, "to see the restored mosaics at San Vitale."

"That'd be just fine, Larissa."

"What?"

"That's fine," I yelled.

"Oh good," she said. "Thank you, Joe."

"Have a good – " I said.

"And make sure Zara gets to her therapy appointment on time. Thursday, two o'clock."

"OK," I said.

"Did you hear that? Thursday at two."

"I heard you," I shouted.

"OK, I'll call you later," she said. "*Ciao ciao*." She hung up, and I handed the phone back to Zara.

"She's going to Ravenna for a few days," I said.

Zara nodded. "She told me."

"I guess there are some mosaics up there she wants to have a look at."

"She's with some guy," Zara said. "It's totally obvious. Why doesn't she just say it?"

"If she is with someone," I said, "maybe she's afraid to tell you because she doesn't want to upset you."

“Upset me?” Zara said. “What’s upsetting about my mom fucking some guy she just met in a bar?”

“Zara –”

“I’m *glad* she’s doing it,” she said. “Maybe now she’ll stop freaking out about everything all the time.”

I stirred the eggplant, trying to think of what to say. She looked at me for a second, then picked up Rauca, who was sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, scratching his ear. “Come here, baby,” Zara said, picking him up and starting up the stairs. “At least you love me.”

Chapter 9

We spent the next four days – almost every hour we could – in the library. During that time, I went through shelves of Testaccio reports, finding nothing like the *Chi-Rho* amphorae. I suppose that made some sense, because, even though there had been a number of excavations there over the last hundred years, each one had only explored a small section of the hill, and so maybe it wasn't that strange that the little areas Constantine's garbage had taken up hadn't been found (until Niece Nobody stumbled onto them, that is.

But the vault contained more than just reports from Testaccio; it had a substantial collection of *Notizie* chronicling shipwrecks, too.

The pictures from the shipwrecks looked so hauntingly beautiful and lonely. But that's not what made me sad as I looked at them. Many of the wrecks, which the deep water had preserved for almost two thousand years, had been destroyed by bombs, depth charges, and sea mines during World War II. It was heartbreaking, just getting a sense of all that was missing.

As I went through report after report, finding nothing useful, I began to think that there must be some way to narrow my search. I wondered: where would the bizarrely-shaped *Chi-Rho* amphorae have come from? I'd been looking mostly at shipwrecks found at Ostia and Portus – ancient ports that had serviced Rome. But if I knew the origin point – where SID PMP's vineyards were – then I could focus on shipwrecks found along the route from wherever that was, to Rome.

I left the vault with that in mind, and joined Zara at what had become her table among the stacks. She was turning out to be an excellent researcher, partly, I think because I'd decided to pay her as my assistant. I wasn't paying her much, but it was a sign of respect, and she was earning it. Every day in the library, she consumed a tremendous amount of information in a short time, and she easily remembered small details about the things she'd learned, as well as the exact place she'd found them.

I asked for her help in tracing where the *Chi-Rho* amphorae had come from, and she suggested that the wine may have been a favorite of Constantine's from an early age.

Constantine, she told me, had been born in present day Serbia but had spent most of his childhood with the Emperor Diocletian in the East – especially northern Turkey, but also along the Danube, and in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

"OK," I said. "Northern Turkey – let's start there. Why was Constantine there?"

"He was like a hostage at Diocletian's palace there," Zara said. "I mean, not totally. He could move around and stuff, and he fought in battles and did lots of things. But Constantine's dad was ruling, um, in the West, like taking care of things for Diocletian there. And I guess Diocletian kept Constantine with him to make sure his dad kept following orders."

"What kind of orders?" I asked.

"The worst thing Diocletian did," she said, "was persecute Christians."

That persecution went on for two years; it was the last and worst one that the Empire ever saw. Constantine wasn't a Christian at that point, but some scholars think he was impressed by how well the Christians – who had seen their friends and family tortured and killed, and their churches destroyed – had endured.

Then Diocletian got sick and retired. Some said he was struck down by God. Constantine went to join his father, who was still ruling in the West, and the two soon went up to York together to fight against raiding tribes. Constantine's father died there, and Constantine took his place as ruler.

After securing the border, Constantine returned to the continent, spending most of his time either in Trier, or in southern France, in the city of Arles.

In Rome, at the same time, a young man named Maxentius declared himself emperor. Like Constantine, he was the son of one of Diocletian's lieutenants, and also like Constantine, he wanted the whole Empire for himself. But he wasn't much of a soldier, and he wasn't bold. But Constantine was, and he proved it by marching down in hopes of conquering Rome – the birthplace, capital, and most glorious city of the Empire.

"When he got to Rome," Zara said, "he met Maxentius' army at the Milvian Bridge. That was in 312, when your, uh," she giggled, "your vagina amphora got buried."

"It's not my vagina," I said.

"Sid's vagina, then," she said. We'd started calling the winemaker "Sid" by that point.

Then Zara pushed one of the open books in front of her so it slid across the table. She said, "We should go on a field trip to the Milvian Bridge."

"Well," I said, "I should probably keep working on the shipwrecks. Especially now that I know Constantine was in Northern Turkey and in Arles, maybe some of Sid's amphorae were found in ports there."

"*Come on*," Zara whined. "I gotta get out of here for a while or I'm gonna go totally crazy. I mean, you don't want me to start doing this, like a hundred times, do you?" She began

opening and closing one of the books, faster and faster, until she finally slammed it shut. Then she smiled. “I’m joking,” she said, “but only a little. I really got to get outta here.”

*

We walked back to the house, and she started unlocking her scooter, which was parked in the *cortile*.

“No way,” I said. “We’re not taking that deathtrap.”

“It’s safe,” she said. “I’m a good rider – my dad taught me how to do it.”

“I’m sure you’re a good rider,” I said, “but scooters just *aren’t safe*. Especially in Italy.”

“The bus is gonna take, like, three hours,” she said. “You don’t want to waste all that time, do you?” She lifted the seat, pulled a spare helmet out of the compartment, and held it out to me. “Come on,” she said. “It’s a quick trip.”

I grabbed the helmet and put it on. It smelled like cigarette smoke. “Where’d you get this?”

“Came with the scooter,” she said, starting up the motor.

I lifted my leg over the seat, and my thigh threatened to cramp for a few seconds but seemed to be OK once I sat down. The scooter sagged under my weight, and the tires squished so they barely looked inflated anymore. The scooter clearly was not built for anyone even close to my weight. “I can’t believe your mom lets you ride this thing.”

“I’m only supposed to ride it to my therapist’s,” she said, “but we’re going in that direction, so it’s pretty much the same thing.”

“Great,” I mumbled, feeling around for a place to grab on with my hands, but there was no bar on the back of the seat.

"Put your arms around me," she said, reaching back and putting my hands around her waist. Then she gunned the little motor full blast. For a moment, we didn't move at all. But the *motorino* struggled, and soon we were sluggishly moving out of the *cortile*, gaining speed, bumping and wobbling through the narrow cobblestone streets.

*

The next fifteen harrowing minutes were a blur of cars whizzing by, of Zara's jerks and swerves, and of thumping in and out of potholes. I think having me on the back was tough for her – all the extra weight – and she kept telling me to lean into the turns. But that meant leaning into her, basically, which I didn't want to do. Eventually, of course, I gave up and put my chest against her backpack, and the riding got a little smoother after that.

Zara finally stopped us, lurching, in between a couple other scooters in front of the bridge. I'd never been there before, if you can believe that, but it probably won't come as a surprise when I tell you that the time I'd had in Rome as a grad student was largely spent in museums and libraries.

I took off the old helmet and took a few steps out onto the stone bridge. Zara, after locking the scooter, came up next to me.

*

The first thing you notice about the bridge are the clusters of padlocks – thousands of them – fastened to the metal grates lining the low stone walls. I'd seen a similar thing on the Ponte Sisto,

too, but there weren't nearly as many locks on that bridge. This lock phenomenon was something new since I'd last been to Rome.

I asked Zara about it, and she said, "It's for couples. There was some dumb book where this perfect couple – he was hot and she was hot, and all their friends were hot. They made out on the bridge, and then he put a lock on the fence, you know, we're gonna be in love forever, blah blah."

"Sounds like you've read it."

"Yeah," she said, "but it was a long time ago. I didn't know anything, then."

I wasn't quite sure what to say to that. Did her comment have something to do with James' death? But I didn't have time. She started walking quickly toward the middle of the bridge, and I scrambled to catch up.

By the time I did, I saw that she was looking at a group of college-age boys approaching from the other direction. They were talking loudly and laughing. As we passed them, one of them looked at Zara, and said in what I think was an Australian accent, "Is that your dad or your boyfriend?"

Zara stopped in her tracks, turned around and said, "He's my pimp."

The boy laughed.

"He is," she said. "If you give him a hundred euro, we'll take you back to our whorehouse, and you can fuck me in my room. Bring your friends, too."

The guy smirked. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," she said. "Bring 'em all. Because I can't get enough cock."

The boy stared at her. One of his friends grabbed his shoulder, trying to pull him along. But he shook it off. "I bet you make your daddy real proud," he said.

Zara's face turned a blotchy red.

"Hey now," I said to the kid. He looked at me, and his face was so damn smug that I just blurted out, "Fuck you, you little shit."

He said, "You wanna fuck me too, Daddy?"

I thought, this can only get worse. So I touched Zara's shoulder and said, "Come on, let's go." But she wouldn't budge. She stood there with her hands clenched, and then she went straight up to the boy and pushed him. He laughed, but there was some horrible meanness at the bottom of that – not that Zara was behaving properly – and then his friends were grabbing him, pulling him away, with him shouting something over his shoulder about her having to pay him, if she wanted to play.

It took Zara a long time to calm down after that. She was crying in that deep, wrenching way – almost hyperventilating. I wanted to help her, but there was nothing I could do but sit there with her there, our backs up against the low wall of the bridge. I felt helpless, but it was worse for her.

After a while, her breathing slowed down, and she blew her nose into an old napkin I'd found in my pocket. "That's so gross," she said. Then she laughed, and that made me breathe easier, feeling like she was going to be OK.

I said, "You want to go home?"

"But I haven't told you about what happened here yet."

"All right," I said. "Tell me."

She stood up and wiped her eyes, sniffing, and pointed over the river toward the hills. "Constantine was coming from out there with his army, but Maxentius was ready for him."

She said that the night before Constantine got to the bridge, Maxentius who was by most accounts paranoid and cowardly, had ordered that the sacred Sibylline Books be consulted. The Sibylline Books contained cryptic prophetic verses, and every time Rome was in dire straits, they would be taken out of their vault in the Temple of Apollo and consulted by fifteen special priests. The day before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, the priests came back to Maxentius and said that the Books had prophesied that "the enemy of Rome" would die the next day. So, Maxentius – who had previously planned to hole up behind Rome's thick walls until Constantine gave up and went away – decided to rush out with his army the next day and claim his assured victory.

Rumors of the Sibylline prophesy reached Constantine's soldiers as they approached Rome, and their morale plummeted. Not only were they outnumbered by Maxentius' army, but now the ancient Sibylline oracle was saying they were going to lose.

What happened next is one of the most pivotal events in Western history. Zara didn't say that – I did. It's also murky, and there are differing accounts of it. The most detailed, though, comes from the bishop and historian Eusebius, who was Constantine's close friend and confidante.

Zara had brought a translation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* to the bridge. She pulled it out of her backpack, and handed it to me, saying "It's a primary source."

"Brava," I said.

She turned to a bookmarked page, pointed out where to start, and I read Eusebius' account of what happened to Constantine as he approached Maxentius' army at the bridge:

BEING CONVICED THAT HE NEEDED some more powerful aid than his military forces could afford him, on account of the wicked and magical enchantments which were so diligently

practiced by the tyrant [Maxentius], Constantine sought Divine assistance, deeming the possession of arms and a numerous soldiery of secondary importance, and believing the power of Deity invincible. He considered on which Divinity he might rely for protection and assistance. While engaged in this enquiry, the thought occurred to him, that, of the many emperors who had preceded him, those who had rested their hopes on a multitude of gods, and served them with sacrifices and offerings, had in the first place been deceived by flattering predictions, and oracles which promised them all prosperity, and at last had met with an unhappy end, while not one of their gods had stood by to warn them of the impending wrath of heaven.

SIPPING WINE OF GOLDEN HORN, he reflected on this, and weighing the fact that they who had trusted in many gods had also fallen by manifold forms of death, without leaving behind them either family or offspring, stock, name, or memorial among men: and considering further that those who had already taken arms against the tyrant, and had marched to the battle-field under the protection of a multitude of gods, had met with a dishonorable end (for one of them had shamefully retreated from the contest without a blow, and the other, being slain in the midst of his own troops, became, as it were, the mere sport of death); reviewing, I say, all these considerations, he judged it to be folly indeed to join in the idle worship of unreal gods; and therefore felt it incumbent on him to honor God alone.

ACCORDINGLY, HE CALLED ON GOD with earnest prayer and supplications that he would reveal to him who He was, and stretch forth His right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from Heaven, the account of which it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any

other person. But since the victorious Emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history, when he was honored with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could hesitate to accredit the relation, especially since the testimony of aftertime has established its truth? He said that at noon, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light, centered on the sun, and bearing the inscription: "Conquer by this."

AT THIS SIGHT, he was struck with amazement, but he said that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night came on; then in his sleep Christ appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.

AT DAWN OF DAY HE AROSE, and communicated the marvel to his friends: and then, calling together the workers in gold and precious stones, he sat in the midst of them, and described to them the figure of the sign he had seen, bidding them represent it in gold and precious stones. And this representation I myself have had an opportunity of seeing.

NOW, IT WAS MADE in the following manner: A long spear, overlaid with gold, formed the figure of the cross by means of a transverse bar laid over it. On the top of the whole was fixed a wreath of gold and precious stones; and within this, the symbol of the Saviour's name, two letters indicating the name of Christ by means of its initial characters, the letter Chi [X] being intersected by Rho [P] in its center. These letters [the Chi-Rho] the Emperor wore on his helmet and shield; and he commanded his soldiers to do the same.

THESE THINGS WERE DONE shortly afterward. But at the time above specified, being struck with amazement at the extraordinary vision, and resolving to worship no other god save Him who had appeared to him, he sent for those who were acquainted with the mysteries of His doctrines, and enquired who that God was, and what was intended by the sign of the vision he had seen. They affirmed that He was God, the only begotten Son of the one and only God: that the sign which had appeared was the symbol of immortality, and the trophy of victory over death. They taught him also the causes of His advent, and explained to him the true account of His incarnation.

THE EMPEROR, in wisdom, made the priests of God his counselors, and deemed it incumbent on him to honor the God who had appeared to him with all devotion. And after this, being fortified by well-grounded hopes in Him, he hastened to quench the threatening fire of tyranny.

When I finished reading, I said, "What happened after this?"

Zara said, "there was a huge battle, and when Maxentius started losing, he tried to escape back over the bridge, but everyone else was trying to escape, too, and his horse got pushed off and he drowned in the river. Like, right here," she said, pointing at the murky, rippling water below us. "I guess he didn't know how to swim."

"Maybe," I said. "Or his armor was too heavy, and it pulled him down."

She shivered. "That's horrible. He must have felt so helpless. He was probably yelling, and trying to get out of the stirrups –"

"They didn't have stirrups," I said. "But, you're right; that's a bad way to go. Still, I can think of worse ways."

“Like what?”

I thought of telling her about Tiberius’ torture, but I didn’t want her brain or mine fixated on that morbid image, so I just said, “Ways that take longer. Those would be worse.”

She looked like she wanted to say something after that, and of course, in my head it was about her dad, but she didn’t. She just looked down at the dark flowing river. After a while, I said, “You want to go?”

She nodded, and we started walking back to the scooter.

“I guess Eusebius would say that God was right, and the Sibylline Books were wrong,” I said, as we walked.

Zara looked at me. “But that’s what’s so funny. The Books said the enemy of Rome would die, and he did.”

Chapter 10

After dinner, we stayed at the kitchen table, listening to that Italian singer Zara was into. She was making a sketch from one of the pictures Dario had sent me, that I'd printed out for her.

While she was doing that, I was emailing Duncan, telling him I was worried about how little time I had left, and asking him if he had any brilliant ideas about how to quickly find out more about Sid and the *Chi-Rho* amphorae.

Zara looked up from her sketch pad and said, "Emailing your girlfriend?"

"A colleague, smartass," I said, which was technically true, although I'd been writing Elisabetta a couple of minutes earlier.

Zara sighed, sounding bored. "Who found these amphorae, anyway?"

"I don't know, exactly," I said.

She looked at me. "Was it an archaeologist? Maybe one that I met when I was on my field trip?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"I bet it was," she said.

"I doubt it."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I just do."

She glared at me. “How am I supposed to help figure all this stuff out if you don’t ever tell me anything?”

“I really can’t –”

“It’s not fair!”

“I’m just trying to make sure you don’t get in any trouble,” I said.

“What’s gonna happen? The archaeology police are gonna break down the door and put us in a really, really old jail?”

“Zara, you promised you wouldn’t do this.”

She slumped back in her chair. “I *know*, but there has to be something you can tell me. Come on.”

“I don’t know that much, really.”

“Fine,” she said. “Then I’m not gonna tell you what I learned about the *Chi-Rho*.”

I went back to writing my email to Duncan.

She said, “It’s really amazing and important, what I learned. But I guess you’ll never know.”

I looked up at her. “OK,” I said, “but you have to tell me about the *Chi-Rho*, *and* you have to change this horrible music. Then maybe, just maybe I’ll tell you a tiny little something.”

She jumped up, ran over to the computer on the counter, and shut off the music. Then she sat back down and looked at me excitedly. She said, “The *Chi-Rho* didn’t used to stand for Christ. Before that, it stood for *chrestos*. That meant good luck. Lots of people used it. And my book said –”

“Who’s the publisher?”

“Oxford University Press.”

"Good," I said. "That's reputable. Go on."

"It *said*," she went on, "that most of Constantine's soldiers weren't Christian and that they thought the *Chi-Rho* he made them draw on their shields – you know, after his vision – they thought it was an old good-luck charm that emperors used to use, like a long time before him. But the Christian soldiers in his army thought it meant Christ."

I said, "That's mildly interesting." She made a face at me, and I said, "What do you think it means?"

"It means," she said, "that Constantine was *smart*. He found the right thing that would make all his guys happy, so they would all know they had protection in the battle with Maxentius."

She sat back in her chair. "And now," she said, "you gotta tell me something – something good, otherwise it doesn't count."

"OK," I said. "The reason I know you didn't meet the person who dug up our amphorae, is that she wasn't working with the archaeologists you met when you went."

"But she worked with them, in Testaccio, later," Zara said.

"Not that you heard it from me, but yes."

"I don't get it," Zara said. "She found our amphorae while she was working with the archaeologists?"

"Yes," I said.

"But then why," she asked, "aren't the archaeologists researching the amphorae instead of us?"

"What I heard," I said, "which is something you're not hearing now, and will forget once you have not heard it, is that she found one of the amphorae, the one with the relief of Bacchus

and Ariadne, I believe. But she didn't tell the archaeologists about it. She covered up what she'd found."

Zara narrowed her eyes. "Who *did* she tell?"

"She told someone who knows the old tunnels, someone who'd been in them before."

"But," Zara said, "how come the archaeologists don't know about those?"

"I guess there are some things that the archaeologists, who aren't from here, don't know, or don't think are important. People who grew up here have an advantage in that way."

"OK, OK," she said, "so then what happened?"

"She and this person who knew the tunnels found a passage that took them to the edge of the archaeologists' site – "

"And they dug up our amphorae," Zara said.

"That's right," I said. "Not that it matters, because you didn't hear any of it."

Zara picked up her pencil and started in on her sketch. "You know," she said. "You told me *way* more than a little something."

I sighed. "I did, didn't I."

"Thanks," she said.

*

Not long after that, Zara went up to her room to watch a show on her computer, while I went into James' studio to read. I'd been winding down over the last few nights by reading *The Two Towers*.

That particular night, I read the part where Gandalf describes what happened to him after he fell off the bridge into the abyss while fighting the demonic Balrog. It made me think of Maxentius tumbling off the Milvian Bridge and drowning in his heavy armor. What did he see after the cold water crushed his lungs? A big hand pulling him out of the river – now the River Styx – and plopping him onto Charon's boat to be ferried across to the Underworld?

When Gandalf fell off his bridge, this is what he says it was like, in conversation with Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli:

"Long time I fell," he [Gandalf] said at last, slowly, as if thinking back with difficulty. "Long I fell, and he [the Balrog] fell with me. I was burned. Then we plunged into the deep water and all was dark. Cold it was as the tide of death: almost it froze my heart."

"Deep is the abyss that is spanned by Durin's Bridge, and none has measured it," said Gimli.

"Yet it has a bottom, beyond light and knowledge," said Gandalf.

Gandalf chases the Balrog up the Endless Stairs, which take them onto a snowy mountain peak where they fight. Gandalf wins, but dies in the process. "*Then darkness overtook me,"* he says, "*and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell."*

"Naked I was sent back – for a brief time, until my task is done. And naked I lay on the mountain-top."

He's eventually found by his old friend, Gwaihir the giant eagle, who's rescued him many times before. Gandalf thanks him, saying, *"Ever am I fated to be your burden, friend at need."*

'"A burden you have been," he [the eagle] answered, "but not so now. Light as a swan's feather in my claw you are. The Sun shines through you. Indeed I do not think you need me any more: were I to let you fall, you would float upon the wind."'

I know this is just a story – it's not true. But as I sat there in James' studio, reading, I thought I could feel James in there with me, asking for a taste of the Scotch I'd brought him.

That made me look around the room and listen. Of course, I didn't hear anything, not with my ears, but the room suddenly felt crowded with all the people who had been inside it throughout the many years since it had been built, and also with the people who had lived in different buildings that stood in that same spot before *La Casa della Sorpresa* was there.

Like I said, it felt crowded. So I got up, went downstairs, and then outside into the *cortile*. There was a half moon in the sky and a breath of wind in the warm night air.

I walked through the narrow streets into the Campo, where I passed drunken college kids staggering their way through the piazza, and all the people eating at tables in front of the Campo's restaurants. I was followed for a while, too, by the usual Gypsies wanting me to buy green laser pointers they were flashing all around, and the little helicopter toys they tossed into the air and came fluttering down onto the cobblestones.

I made my way to the Tiber and walked along it, watching the dim orange streetlights shining onto it until I was tired out. Then I circled back home and went to bed.

*

In the morning, I got an email from Duncan suggesting that I look into a 10th century Byzantine compendium called the *Suda*. It's a giant reference book that quotes extensively from Christian

scholars and authors, and also from the works of pagan writers who came before them. Duncan said there were references to different kinds of wine and winemaking regions in there. The only catch was that the *Suda* has never been fully translated, and my Greek is much worse than my Latin.

Duncan had spent a little time looking through it, and his email included a short, roughly translated passage from one of Constantine's magistrates that mentioned his Emperor drinking wine from a golden horn – just as Eusebius had. This in itself wasn't a breakthrough, but it was close enough to the mark so that I decided to spend some library time sifting through the *Suda*.

Zara let that go on for the better part of two days before she talked me into another field trip. I agreed to it partly because things had been awkward in the house since Larissa had gotten back from Ravenna, she and Zara were hardly speaking, and I wanted to brighten things up a bit for Zara, if I could. She also sold the outing to me by assuring me it'd be brief, and that it was "totally important."

We took her scooter again, because it would have been a forty-five minute walk to our destination: Constantine's triumphal arch.

*

The arch sits right next to the Colosseum, which Zara slowly circled before coasting to a stop in front of Constantine's blocky monument.

After I got off the scooter, I pulled my sweaty helmet off and stretched my knee for a minute before following Zara right up to the tall metal fence surrounding the arch.

“Constantine,” she said, leaning against the fence, “built the arch after he beat Maxentius. It was like a way of bragging about it.”

“I never thought of triumphal arches as bragging,” I said.

“It was totally bragging,” she said. “I mean, look at it. It’s so huge, and it looks like it could just fall right on top of you and crush you into nothing if you did anything Constantine didn’t like.”

“OK,” I said, “triumphal arches are propaganda. But they’re more than just that, don’t you think?”

She pushed her sunglasses up on her nose, staring at the arch in the bright sunlight. “I guess,” she said. “I mean, it’s kinda pretty. I like the columns, and all the sculptural stuff they carved into it – you know, the reliefs. Those are the things I wanted to tell you about.”

“What about them?” I asked.

“Oh, wait,” she said. “First I have to tell you about Sol. But we have to see it from the other side.” She grabbed my arm and led me around to the other side of the monument so we could see the Colosseum through the archway.

“Imagine,” Zara said, “that you can see a huge statue right through the archway. It’s sooo big, they called it the Colossus, and they named the Colosseum after it.” She turned to me. “Can you see it?”

“You mean the Colossus? In my head?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It used to be right there. And Constantine’s arch framed it perfectly if you were coming from the old road that used to be behind us. That’s the road you’d take from the Forum, if you were going to the Colosseum to see the games.”

“Where did you get this information?” I asked.

"Elizabeth Marlowe wrote about it," Zara said. "She's a professor. It was in a peer-reviewed journal, I swear."

"I've seen her speak."

Zara slumped a little. "You know about Sol, and her article already?"

"No, not really," I said quickly. "It was a long time ago, and the talk was so boring I fell asleep. I barely remember anything."

She glared at me. "How could you? Elizabeth Marlowe is so brilliant!" Zara went into her backpack and pulled out a stapled sheaf of pages. "This is just the beginning of the article," she said. "But you should read it all. It's so good. I love her."

Zara read:

To illustrate some of the key paradigm shifts in their discipline, art historians often point to the fluctuating fortunes of the Arch of Constantine. Reviled by Raphael, revered by Alois Reigl, condemned anew by the reactionary Bernard Berenson and conscripted by the openly Marxist Ranucchio Bianchi Bandinelli, the arch has served many agendas.

Despite their wildly divergent conclusions, however, these scholars all share a focus on the arch's decorative program. Time and again, the naturalism of the monument's spoliated, second-century reliefs is compared to the less organic, hieratic style of the fourth century carvings. Out of that contrast, sweeping theories of regrettable, passive decline or meaningful, active transformation are constructed. This methodology has persisted at the expense of any analysis of the structure in its urban context. None of these influential critics has considered the arch as part of the larger urban ensemble or tried to understand how it would have been seen in its particularly flashy setting in the area now known as the Colosseum Valley. Even the most

recent and theoretically advanced work on the arch perpetuates the interpretive amputation of the structure from its environment in the densely built up late antique cityscape of Rome.

Zara looked up from the printout. "I love her. Don't you love her?"

"Yeah," I said, "she's very good."

"I mean," Zara said, flipping through the pages, "it's kinda too long to read the whole thing. But it's worth it. Should I read it all?"

No, I thought, please, not the whole thing, not in this heat. I said meekly, "Can you paraphrase it for me?"

"Yeah, but it won't sound nearly as good as she does."

"That's fine," I said.

Zara thought for a second. "Um, one of the things she says – I mean, she says tons of things, but the most important is about Sol. He was the sun god, but you know that, right?"

"Keep going," I said, "I'm your student right now."

"Um, OK," she said. Then she looked back at the arch. "Constantine built the arch like a frame – it's like a painting, and inside it, was this huge statue of Sol." She pointed to a spot in front of the Colosseum. "This is what happened. Nero, who was psycho and killed Christians in really weird ways, and lots of other people, too – he had this huge statue made of himself, because he thought he was a god, and they put it right here in front of the Colosseum. But that was before the Colosseum was built, not much though, just a few years before."

I was proud, listening to her. This was a seventeen-year-old girl who'd been studying these things for almost no time at all. She'll be a great scholar one day, I thought.

"But with Nero," Zara said, "the Romans finally said that's it, we're sick of the crazy stuff you're doing, and so they went after him, but he died before they could get him. He had his

servant stab him to death because he was too scared to do it himself. And then Vespasian – he was friends with Pliny, remember? He took Nero's head off the colossus and made it Sol. And he was the one who actually built that," she said, pointing at the Colosseum. "And the people were happy, and they had free bread and wine and gladiator fights, and they loved him. Vespasian, I mean." She took a breath. "But not Jews. Jews hated him because he fought them when they rebelled, and he destroyed the Great Temple, and took all their stuff, and sold lots of them into slavery. That's really sad, isn't it?"

"It is," I said.

"It's weird, looking at the Colosseum," Zara said, "knowing that Vespasian built it with all the money he stole in Judea."

"Yeah," I said. "Now that you say it, it is weird. But in another sense, it makes perfect sense. A lot of weird, brutal things happened in the Colosseum."

Zara just nodded, and was quiet for a while. Then she said, "When I was little, my dad said there was a giant that lived underneath the Colosseum, and he used to eat tourists who carved their names into the walls."

"Really?" I said. "Did it scare you?"

"No, he told it in a funny way," she said. "He said the giant's name was Colosseo the Great, and for a long time, I thought that was why they called it the Colosseum."

"He was close," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "His giant was really a god." She turned to me. "You know Constantine believed in him, right?"

"Who?"

"Sol," she said. "Why else do you think he built the arch to frame the statue like that? He had Sol on his coins, too, and he built another statue of Sol in Constantinople when he moved the capital there."

"Wait," I said. "But that's after he converted to Christianity."

"I know," Zara said. "It's weird."

"Does Elizabeth Marlowe's article say anything about that?"

"No," Zara said. "But she's written other articles. I can look at those when we get back."

I said, "OK, good," I said. "Let's go back, then. Unless there's something else you want to show me here."

"No. Well, yeah – sort of." she said. "I mean, I was confused about it before, but now I get it." She rubbed her bumpy cheek. "I think I do, anyway."

"What is it?" I said.

"It's that, um, Constantine stole things from other places, like old monuments to other emperors, and put them on *his* arch. Like that circle." She pointed at a round relief panel on the arch's attic. "That's not Constantine. It's Trajan, only they reshaped the face and made it look like Constantine. And then on top, that's Marcus Aurelius with the pig and that big sheep – "

"It's a sacrifice scene," I said.

"You mean he's about to – ? Oh," she said. "I wonder how bad it hurt, when he killed them." She turned to me. "How did he do it? Like with a knife?"

"The Romans did it in different ways," I said. "Sometimes they used a mallet, sometimes a knife –"

"Do you think it hurt the animals to die like that? I bet it hurt them really bad."

"I think it happened fast," I said. But I didn't know that for sure. And it hit me, the seriousness of what Dario had planned for the *Vinalia* celebration. He'd mentioned the sacrifice of a lamb in an offhand way, as if it were no big deal.

Zara said, "Even if Marcus Aurelius killed them fast, it still must have hurt, really, really bad, to die like that."

We both stood there for a while, looking at Marcus Aurelius with the animals. Then we walked quietly back to the scooter.

Chapter 11

On our way back to the library, as we were about to pass the Capitoline Hill, Zara asked if we could see Constantine's statue in the Capitoline Museum. She said that after studying him for so long in the library, she wanted to see Constantine "face to face."

I hadn't been to any museums, *not one*, in the weeks since I'd arrived in Rome, which felt almost blasphemous to me. So I said to her, yes, yes – let's go, just in time for her to turn onto the skinny, steep road that leads up to the top of the Capitoline Hill, where the museum is.

Our path took us right through the middle of the piazza, where Michelangelo put an ancient bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius on horseback.

When I used to go there as a grad student, I always liked to stop in front of Marcus Aurelius, not because the statue is impressive, although it is, but because of something the ancient sculptor captured in Marcus Aurelius' face. He's always looked sad to me, sitting up there on his horse, and when I see him there, looking glum, I'm reminded of his doctor, Galen, prescribing opium mixed with wine for his "melancholy."

It's odd to think that of all people, the great emperor Marcus Aurelius was depressed, but it also makes sense. He was thoughtful and wise, but in a heavy way. He said things like, "Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth." I love the tolerance in that message and the openness to all points of view, but it's also a wishy-

washy thing to say. If you thought like that all the time, you'd just float around without an anchor.

Of course he didn't think like that all the time. He could be bitterly opinionated. For instance, he thought music and dancing were pointless, and he described sex as "the friction of a piece of gut and, following a sort of convulsion, the expulsion of some mucus."

But he had a passion for Greek tragedies. He couldn't get enough of them, whether it was watching them in Pompey's Theater with a crowd, or reading them alone in bed at night. Maybe he overexposed himself to tragic stories, and it did something to him. I don't know.

His *Meditations*, which he composed as an older man, are almost entirely devoid of humor, although apparently he was happy as a boy. He used to love crushing grapes with his feet after the harvest, as well as hunting and climbing in the hills.

As he got older, something shifted in him. It might have something to do with Rome's changing fortunes, because it was during his reign, which ended in 180 CE, that the Empire – after centuries of unparalleled success – finally began its decline.

The Empire endured crippling plagues and waged successful but very costly wars during Marcus' lifetime, and it was in pieces by the time Diocletian rose to power, a hundred years later. Diocletian used extreme methods to glue things back together, and he created new, serious economic and social problems in the process. When he retired in 305, civil war broke out, which Constantine ended up winning.

Constantine doesn't seem to have suffered from the doubt that haunted Marcus Aurelius. His writings are forcefully confident; they're heavy with evangelical style, and are, at times, condescending and oblivious to the consideration that those who believe differently might have a legitimate point of view. Still, he was tolerant, although in his own backhanded, somewhat

vicious way. Here's part of a letter he wrote to a group of Christian bishops in Carthage, telling them how happy he was that they weren't persecuting any pagans in the city who were continuing to sacrifice to their gods:

I have just been informed that you, the servants of God, have done this willingly, and I have rejoiced that you demand no punishment upon the impious and wicked, the sacrilegious and profane, the perfidious and irreligious, upon those who displease God and are the enemies of the Church, but ask rather that they should be pardoned. This is to know God truly and thoroughly, this is to walk in the way of His Commandments, this is to believe with happiness, this is to think with truth, this is to understand that when the enemies of the Church are spared in this world, the greater punishment is laid up against them for hereafter.

*

Zara showed me that letter in one of her books after we'd left Marcus Aurelius behind and were sitting in front of Constantine's colossal statue in one of the courtyards of the museum.

We sat in the sun, our backs against the courtyard's old columns, looking up from the book to the statue from time to time, to square Constantine's words with his marble likeness.

The giant statue is in pieces, now. Constantine's eight-foot marble head sits on a pedestal next to his hand, his foot, and part of his arm. His face looks very Italian, like mine, in some ways. His nose is big and curved, he's got a cleft chin, perfectly thin semi-circular eyebrows (he is said to have plucked them into shape, like Julius Caesar did), and a Roman bowl cut. He's not handsome by classical Greek standards, but he looks strong, serene, and implacable.

*

We walked around the museum a little bit after that, but didn't stay long, although I wanted to. I was worried about how the days were evaporating, and I couldn't tell if we'd made any progress at all.

So we went back to the library and stayed there till it closed. By the time we got back to the house and started making *pomodori al riso*, we were deep in conversation about Christianity, and what it must have taken for someone like Constantine, who'd grown up in the official pagan tradition, to convert.

Eusebius says Constantine saw his vision of the cross on the sun, and that he was visited by Christ in a dream. He says that the truth of this was confirmed by Constantine's great victory over Maxentius the next day.

But is it really true? It's a story, and a convenient one, given the fact that Constantine got his divine mojo just in time to counter the Sibylline prophecy and restore his soldiers' confidence before the battle.

Is it true that God sacrificed Christ His only son to redeem us, and that we must believe this in order to receive His grace, even without the proof Constantine supposedly got at the Milvian Bridge?

This is what we talked about over bread dipped in olive oil and our meal of stuffed tomatoes. And after we'd cleaned up (and left a plate for Larissa, who hadn't yet come home), Zara took me up to her room, to the bookshelf that was her shrine to J.R.R. Tolkien. She handed me a little book based on a lecture he gave at the University of St. Andrews in 1939 – not long

after he'd begun writing *The Lord of the Rings*, and the year World War II started to rage. The pamphlet-sized book was called *On-Fairy Stories*, and I took it down into the cave to read it.

I don't think Zara knew exactly why she gave me the book; I think she did it intuitively, or simply because it was her only book, she said, that talked about Christianity. But if there was something in particular she wanted me to see, I think it may have been in the Epilogue:

This "joy" which I have selected as the mark of the true fairy-story (or romance), or as the seal upon it, merits more consideration.

The peculiar quality of the "joy" in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a "consolation" for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, "Is it true?" The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): "If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world." That is enough for the artist (or the artist part of the artist). But in the "eucatastrophe" [the opposite of catastrophe/tragedy] we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater – it may be a far off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world. The use of this word gives a hint of my epilogue. It is a serious and dangerous matter. It is presumptuous of me to touch upon such a theme; but if by grace what I say has in any respect any validity, it is, of course, only one facet of a truth incalculably rich: finite only because the capacity of Man for whom this was done is finite.

Chapter 12

Four days later, all spent locked up in the library with the *Suda*, that black hole of a book, I still had found nothing to help shed any light on Sid or the *Chi-Rho* amphorae. I wasn't at my best, either; I was spending more time worrying about running out of time than I was focusing on the entries I was supposed to be studying.

By the late afternoon on that fourth day, I'd gotten so frustrated that I slammed the volume in front of me shut; it sounded like a gunshot, echoing through the library.

Zara practically jumped out of her seat. "You scared me," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't mean to slam it that hard."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said. "That's what I keep finding. Lots of nothing."

"Oh," she said. "Um, I got something. But it's bad. I mean, it was bad for Constantine, but maybe it's good for us."

"What is it?"

"I could tell you about it here," she said. "*Or,* I could show it to you. Like, at the spot where it *actually happened*."

"You want to go for another field trip."

She leaned forward. "You'll like this one. Plus it's close. We'll be back here in half an hour."

"No we won't," I said.

"Really –"

"That's OK," I said, waving my hand angrily. "It doesn't matter anyway. Another hour or two isn't going to help me dig my way out of this fucking hole."

She shrunk back.

I thought to myself, nicely done, asshole. It may sound trite, but I wanted to be a good role model for her, so that when she was feeling bad, or when she was overwhelmed by something, she had someone to look at and think, that's how you do it, you keep rolling forward. You don't stop trying, no matter how hard it seems.

I thought about all my stupid little problems, and how they stretched out and affected other people – important people – and that the way I deal with them, even if I'm beaten in the end, makes a difference.

"Let's go," I said.

Zara's looked up. "Are you sure? Cause we can totally stay here."

I got up and started putting pens and notes into my shoulder bag. "I'm sure," I said. "Where are we going?"

*

Fifteen minutes later, we were riding down the boulevard that was built by Mussolini as his new Triumphal Way connecting the Capitoline with the Colosseum. The wide street was bright with the sun's glare, and I squinted at the Colosseum and Constantine's Arch as we passed by them.

We then continued on a little farther to the Baths of Diocletian and parked in an alleyway that ran along the bath complex's ancient walls.

I'd been there before, of course. It was an important site, although one that was built after the era that I was most familiar with. The baths were constructed from 298 to 306. They were fabulous and new – the hip place to go when Constantine took over the city in 312.

When Zara and I walked inside, I looked up at the red granite columns. They're the biggest in Rome, rising up to vaulted ceilings that are nearly as high as the Pantheon's dome. As we walked over the colored marble floor, I tried to imagine what the Baths were like during Constantine's time. I'd tell you what I think they were like, but the philosopher Seneca, who lived in an apartment overlooking similar public baths, described them much better than I ever could.

My dear Lucilius,

If you want to study, quiet is not nearly as necessary as you might think. Here I am, surrounded by all kinds of noise. Conjure up in your imagination all the sounds that make one hate one's ears. I hear the grunts of musclemen exercising and jerking those heavy weights around; they are working hard, or pretending to. I hear their sharp hissing when they release their pent up breath. If there happens to be a lazy fellow content with a simple massage I hear the slap of hand on shoulder; you can tell whether it's hitting a flat or a hollow. If a ball-player comes up and starts calling out his score, I'm done for. Add to this the racket of a cocky bastard, a thief caught in the act, and a fellow who likes the sound of his own voice in the bath, plus those who plunge into the pool with a huge splash of water. Besides those who just have loud voices, imagine the skinny armpit-hair plucker whose shrill cries never stop except when he's doing his job and

making someone else shriek for him. Now add the mingled cries of the drink peddler and the sellers of sausages, pastries, and hot foods, each hawking his wares with his own particular grunt and peal.

The Baths of Diocletian are nothing like that anymore; they're peaceful now, and have been since long before Michelangelo converted the part of the old complex we were walking through into a church.

"It's so quiet in here," Zara said. "And it's cool, too. Not the kind of place you'd think Constantine would murder his wife in."

I stopped. "He murdered his wife?" A vague recollection began to form in my mind from the one class I'd taken on Late Antiquity, as an undergrad. But I couldn't reel it in. "She died – how?"

"Her name was Fausta," Zara said excitedly. "You know, like Faust, only with an A at end."

"OK," I said. "What happened?"

"She betrayed Constantine. Here in the baths." She swept her hand around the room. "They're gone now, but there used to be all these private rooms – you know, like with saunas and bathtubs and stuff. And no one really knows exactly why he did it, but wait, I gotta backtrack."

She took a breath. "So," she said, "Constantine and Fausta, and his son from his first marriage – his name was Crispus – they were moving around the Empire, fighting battles and stuff, and they came back to Rome in a really hot summer, just like how it is outside now. But that was in 326, the same year the sheep amphora is from. They came back to Rome because there was a big celebration for the anniversary of Constantine being Emperor."

"All right," I said. "And he killed her in the baths?"

"Yeah. He killed his son, too."

"What?" I said. "You're not making this up, are you? It's too chilling."

"No! It's true, I swear."

"Well," I said, "Why'd he kill them?"

Zara lowered her voice to a secretive, dramatic whisper. "No one knows for sure why he did it," she said. "Some of the old writers say Crispus and Fausta were having sex."

"Wait," I said, "Fausta was his stepmom?"

"Yeah," Zara said. "She was young, and Constantine was old."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "How old?"

"Like my mom's age."

"That's not old," I said. Larissa was 52.

"Um, OK," she said doubtfully. "But she was closer to Crispus' age than Constantine's, so maybe they *were* having sex."

"Could be," I said. "And you think that's why Constantine killed them?"

She thought for a second, then said, "No. I don't. Because he had Crispus dragged away and taken to a jail and executed first – before he did anything to Fausta. There's this one story that says Fausta wanted her own kid to be emperor next, so she set Crispus up. She told Constantine that Crispus *tried* to get with her, but she said no way. And Constantine believed her story, and killed Crispus."

"That's awful," I said. "So that's what you think happened?"

She looked up at the tall marble walls, thinking, and said, "No. I mean – sort of. I think Fausta was really sexy or she had something, like, to make men fall in love with her – she was

like Cleopatra or something. Maybe she said funny things, and knew about people, like, she knew what to say to them to make them feel good. Constantine could have picked *anyone* in the whole Empire, and he picked her. But she only married him cause he was Emperor. And she had sex with other people. She couldn't help it. Maybe Crispus was one of them. And she was with someone else here in the baths when Constantine finally found out about what she was doing. And you know what he did when he caught her?"

"What?"

She looked at me suspiciously. "I can't believe you don't know this."

"Will you just tell me what he did?"

"OK, fine," she said. "He boiled her, right there in the bath."

Death by boiling – it sounded suddenly familiar, and it was almost as bad a way to go as Tiberius' torture.

I said, "And you really think he did it because he caught her cheating on him?"

"Yeah!" Zara said. "Fausta was with someone else in the bath, and he found her, or his spies did, and they held her until he could get there. And then he chained her up and locked her in there and had his guys put more wood on the fire, more and more wood, and the water got hotter and hotter, and she was screaming, Let me out, I'm sorry I'm sorry, I love you. I always have, I love you forever. But Constantine wouldn't let her out, no matter what she said. He left her in that boiling water until her skin burned off and she died."

"That's grisly," I said. "From his letters, though, he sounded like he wanted God to do the punishing so he wouldn't have to. But maybe when it came to his family, it hit so close to home he couldn't control himself."

Zara nodded. “Everyone’s always fucking everyone else, and then they hate each other and do crazy things.”

“Well,” I said, “not everyone does that.”

“Yeah but most people do,” she said. “Like my mom and dad, they fucked other people.”

“You mean,” I said slowly, “when they were younger?”

“No,” she said. “In our house.”

I looked at her. “What makes you think that?”

“I could hear them.”

I wanted to ask if, just possibly, she’d heard something else, or if she’d been half asleep, and it could have been a dream. But then I thought, no, she probably knew what she heard.

*

We went back to the scooter, and Zara started it up and shut if off six times before shakily taking us out onto the road. I told her to head back to the house, thinking that a snack and a little rest might help before going back to the library.

Larissa was sitting in the kitchen when we walked in. She held up two sheets of paper – a photo of the *Chi-Rho* amphorae and the sketch Zara had made from it. She said in a controlled monotone, “What is this?”

Zara gaped at her. “You went into my desk!”

“What is this?” Larissa repeated.

Zara shut her mouth firmly and Larissa turned to me. “What have you two been doing together?”

I said, “We’re working on a project, that’s all. It’s just research.”

Larissa pointed at the photo. “Where was this taken?”

“A, ah, friend of mine’s working on a dig,” I said. “He’s not a friend, exactly – ”

“He’s not an archaeologist,” Larissa said. “That’s obvious.” She shook her head, staring at the photo. “This excavation – it’s not an excavation at all – it’s more like butchery. And it’s in Testaccio; anyone can see that from the terracotta scaling in the walls – ”

I could feel Zara looking at me.

“And look at this,” Larissa continued, “Your friend has obliterated the stratigraphy. It’s like someone was hammering away at it with a sledgehammer, a little here, a little there. There’s not the slightest hint of methodology to it.” She looked up at me. “This isn’t a legal dig, is it.”

“Well,” I said, “all I can really say is that I’m going to do everything I can to make it legal.”

She stared, stone-faced, at me. “Joe, when you were finishing your dissertation, staying in *my house*, eating at *my table*, you knew, the whole time, didn’t you, that everything you were writing was based on a lie.”

“What?” I said.

“And now,” she said, her voice shaking with anger, “you’re doing it *again*.”

For a second I just stood there, while they both stared at me. I didn’t know what to say. I’d known her for so long – how could she think that? Was she jealous because Zara and I had been spending time together? I could barely open my mouth to get myself to say, “No, Larissa. I didn’t do that. And now is a totally different – ”

“You’ve got my daughter helping thieves sell their cultural patrimony! I don’t know what these amphorae are,” she said, thrusting her finger at the photo, “but I don’t want them ending up

in some collector's underground vault when they belong in an Italian museum!" She brought the photo up to her face. "What *are* these?"

Nobody said anything as Larissa looked from me to Zara, then back to me. "Well?" she said.

*

Ultimately, we ended up telling her quite a bit. Not everything, but enough to satisfy her for a while, and as she listened, she began to soften a little. She got up at one point and poured wine for us all, and it was then that I knew that she wasn't going to call the police (at least not right then) or kick me out.

I could also see that the researcher in her was dying to weigh in on what we'd told her. But she was still angry, and if she knew anything that might help us, she held it back.

After we finished explaining and a lull came in the conversation, I said I was going to lie down for a while and do some reading. Zara gave me a nervous look, but I figured they could use some time to talk, or just be around each other without me there. I went down into the cave with one of Larissa's books on ancient mosaics and fell asleep very early.

When I got up the next morning, it was still dark. I made coffee, and decided to take a walk up to the Vatican. I lived close to there one winter when I was a grad student; the apartment had no heat, which was absolutely brutal, but my roommate was nice. She was a depressed Greek girl

who worked in a hotel as a concierge. Mostly what comes to mind when I think about her, though, is that she was an amazing cook.

I remember being surprised at how many priests, or priests in training, I saw walking around the streets in that part of Rome. I shouldn't have been – it was a few blocks from the Vatican, after all – but I had trouble squaring it with what I'd heard about the ever-diminishing number of young men who were entering the Catholic priesthood.

It took me about twenty minutes from Larissa's house to get to the main boulevard that leads up to the front of St. Peter's Basilica. By that time, the sun was just starting to rise, but the countless homeless people in sleeping bags under the covered sidewalks and porticoes hadn't stirred. They looked dead and strangely peaceful.

I used to see them all the time, sleeping there under the covered sidewalks, when I'd come home to my apartment after nights out drinking. At first I was shocked; I thought, why doesn't the Church take care of them? They have all this money, and they can't even help the people sleeping on their doorstep.

I said that to someone in conversation at the time; it might have been Dario – I can't remember now – but whoever it was said to me, maybe the homeless stay there *because* they're taken care of. Maybe the Church makes sure they don't get hassled by the police at night, and when they get up, they go to a kitchen paid for by the Church, staffed by priests and nuns who are all brilliant ex-chefs, and those homeless people eat way better than *we* do.

When I got to the end of the boulevard, I walked along the rows of columns Bernini built around St. Peter's Square, all the while looking at Michelangelo's great dome that rises out of the basilica in the background.

In the middle of the square is an obelisk that the Romans stole from the Egyptians; Nero had it put in the center of a circus that he built where the Vatican is now. The obelisk was originally created as a symbol representing a ray of the Egyptian Sun god Ra, and now it's the focal point of St. Peter's Square, surrounded by Bernini's arrangement of that conspicuously pagan form of architecture, the column.

It seems strange on the surface, but maybe it makes sense that there's artistic continuity underneath the ideologies of different religions. Michelangelo, too, did more than just borrow from ancient architects, sculptors, and painters; he practically worshipped them.

When I got back to the house and showered, Zara still wasn't up, so I left her a note and headed up to the library. Going to the baths the day before had given me an idea.

One of the main pieces of legislation Diocletian issued during his reign was an edict that attempted to control the Roman economy, which he thought was being ravaged by immoral price-gouging. So he set prices on goods and services. These weren't just guidelines. The penalty for charging more than the official price was death, and on the buyer's side, the penalty for paying more than the official price was also death.

But here's the good part: the official prices were set down by Imperial scribes in long lists that identified individual vendors and workshops, and segmented out each one's products in terms of type and quality. It was in these lists that I found a reference to a winemaker named Sidonia Pompeia, who seemed very likely to be our very own SID PMP from the stamp on the *Chi-Rho* amphorae.

Two different prices were set for her wines: 32 denarii for a pint of wine from her inland vineyard, and 40 denarii for wine from her much better, coastal vineyard which the edict referred to as Golden Horn.

The Golden Horn, as you may know, is the name of the famous waterway that borders the city of Istanbul on its north side. In Latin, Golden Horn is written *Chrysoceras*, which, using the Greek alphabet, begins with X and P – the letters *Chi* and *Rho* that also start the words *Christ* and *chrestos*.

When I saw this, I immediately thought of the amphorae that had been imprinted with Sidonia Pompeia's name and also with the *Chi-Rho*.

The *Chi-Rho* stamp, I realized, pre-dated Constantine's conversion at the Milvian Bridge. It *had* to have. The amphorae must have been filled with Golden Horn wine. I think this wine is what the *Chi-Rho* referred to on the amphorae – not to Christ. Then the wine had to have been aged for at least a few years by the time Constantine drank it and buried it in Testaccio.

I thought of Eusebius' words, and how he said that Constantine had been "sipping wine of Golden Horn" right before his vision, and a story bubbled up into my mind: Constantine had been drinking wine from Sidonia's vineyard on the Golden Horn. He hadn't been drinking *out of* a horn; Golden Horn was *the wine* he was drinking, from Sidonia Pompeia's vineyard. It was a special wine – his favorite.

As he drank this wine, it comforted him. He was worried about the Sibylline prophecy and the morale of his men, and he thought: this might be the end of me. I might die on the battlefield tomorrow. It's happened to so many leaders before me, those who thought they had the protection of the gods. But the old gods are tired. Once upon a time they'd made the Empire strong, but it had grown sick and frail, like they were.

What's needed is new blood, he thought. New divine blood. And while Constantine rubbed his cleft chin and sipped his wine, he saw the *Chi-Rho* stamped into the amphora sitting next to him. He'd seen it many times before, but this time it had a different meaning. He knew it wasn't a coincidence that those letters of the Golden Horn also represented the Christ that more and more of his men were worshipping. And it was also the symbol of good fortune that the greatest emperors of old had carried with them to victory.

None of this was a coincidence; it was a sign, and Constantine could almost see it up in sky where his most powerful divine ally, Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun, who had helped him conquer in the past, was shining down on him. Constantine shaded his eyes, and the sunlight took on a cross-like shape through his fingers.

That night, he drank, and he thought, and he dreamt. In the morning, he told the men around him of the signs he had seen, and of the divine understanding which had visited him in the night. He commanded them to take sticks from their cooking fires and draw, in burnt charcoal, the *Chi-Rho* onto their helmets and shields. He told them this would protect them on the battlefield and give them the strength to slaughter their enemies. And he declared that out of their victory, a new world would emerge.

I left the library and walked quickly down the hill because I wanted to share my discovery. And when I was coming into the *cortile* – a sweaty mess from the hot sun – Zara was sitting on her scooter putting her helmet on. She said, "I was coming to get you. Why didn't you answer your phone?"

"I wanted to tell you in person," I said. "I found something, you're going to – "

"Mom went to the Culture Ministry," she said.

"She did what? That's so – I can't believe she did that without telling me first."

"She tried to call you, too," Zara said.

"She couldn't wait two fucking hours till I got back?" I started pacing around the *cortile*.

"I tried to stop her," Zara said. "But she said every minute she waited was another minute they were wrecking the amphorae."

"So she went to the Culture Ministry. Incredible. Should I be expecting the *Carabinieri* to show up and haul me in for questioning?"

"No, no," Zara said. "She promised – she *swore* she wouldn't say any names or anything. You won't get in trouble."

"She doesn't know that! She can't control what they'll do after she talks to them. If they decide to spend even five minutes investigating, it won't take them long to figure out who was involved."

Zara shook her head vigorously. "But she knows the guy at the Ministry. He's like a friend of hers."

"Who?"

"I don't know," Zara said. "But if he's a friend, then he won't, you know, get us in any big trouble."

I wondered what kind of danger I'd exposed us to. Me, Zara, Dario.

Dario. I had to tell him what was going on.

I went inside, pulling out my phone. First I called Larissa, but she didn't pick up. Maybe she was already in the Ministry, showing the photos of the amphorae to her friend there, telling him it was in Testaccio somewhere. And who knows what else she was saying.

Then I called up Dario's number in my list of contacts. I stared at it. What would he do? If the site actually got raided, how would he know the tip off had come from me? But playing it like that felt wrong. Yes, Dario was shady and selfish, but it was still a betrayal not to warn him. Why was I hesitating to call, then?

He scared me. I was still staring at his contact on my phone when Zara came in and asked, "What did you find out at the library?"

"Oh, it was – ah, I should make this call first."

She nodded, then went into the refrigerator and started rummaging around. "Maybe I'll wait until your mom gets back," I said, "and I have more information."

Zara sat down at the table with half a cantaloupe and a spoon. She said, "And then when you have that, you'll call the *tombarolo*?"

"I don't know," I said, opening the fridge and pulling out a bottle of Malvasia. Zara waited until I was on my second glass to ask me about the library again, and at that point I was ready to tell her.

After I did, she got excited, and said she'd found something out, too, through her mom. She said that last night, after I'd gone into the cave, they'd talked about Constantine, and Larissa had described some mosaics that were in a place called Santa Costanza, which was a mausoleum Constantine had designed for his daughter. I hadn't heard of the place; it was, at that point, yet another one of the many wonderful things in Rome that fell outside my narrow area of expertise. But the description Zara said her mom had given her about Santa Costanza made me want to go there before it closed for the day. It sounded important; and if nothing else, I thought it would distract me from worrying about the Culture Ministry, Dario, and everything else.

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We got back on Zara's scooter, and as we rode through the streets, the hot air rushed over my face, making me tired. We had to park a few blocks away from our destination, and during the walk, I listened to Zara tell me how Constantine, after he murdered his wife and son, had fled Rome, never to return. We pieced what happened next together.

After he left Rome, Constantine traveled east and settled in Byzantium, a small town protected by the estuary known as the Golden Horn to the north, and the Sea of Marmara to the south. It was dry country, and the vines that grew there – especially those along the Golden Horn – were strong from reaching deep into the soil for water. That may be one of the reasons the wine was special.

History says that Constantine remained in Byzantium simply because it was a strategic location. But Zara and I think Constantine decided to stay there – and make it the new capital of his Empire – for more personal reasons.

*

The first thing I noticed upon walking into the Santa Costanza's round, temple-like space, was how peaceful it was. This atmosphere is created by the openness and symmetry of the mausoleum's architecture, and the cheerful beauty of the mosaics that cover the walls and ceilings.

One mosaic shows Christ in a white robe gesturing to his apostles. There are gently swaying palm trees behind him and sheep roaming around his feet. Colorful peacocks perch in vines next to wine pitchers, and below them, cherub-like men pick grapes from the vines and cart them to tubs where other men crush them, the red juice flowing into tall amphorae.

Zara pointed at the rosy-cheeked face of a woman pictured in the mosaic above the men crushing wine. She said, "Maybe that's Sidonia Pompeia, and Constantine fell in love with her in the vineyard."

"Maybe it is," I said. It was good to hear her imagining a thing like that.

We kept walking, looking around at the other mosaics illuminated by the sunlight coming through the high windows.

"It feels good in here," Zara said.

She was right. It was so different from what's usually conjured up, in my mind, at least, by the word 'mausoleum.'

"Where's your dad buried?" I asked hesitantly.

She looked at me. "He's in the Protestant Cemetery. You know, where the pyramid is."

I nodded. I'd passed by there many times. The Protestant Cemetery is a famous place, partly because the poets Shelley and Keats were buried there. It was also known for the nearby Pyramid of Cestius, which had been built as a mausoleum by Cestius, a wealthy Roman who had become one of the believers in the Cult of Isis following Cleopatra's lengthy stay in Rome.

"I've walked by there," I said, "but I've never been inside the cemetery. What's it like?"

"It's pretty," she said. "Like here." She looked at the walls around her. "I can't believe this place was made by the same guy who boiled his wife."

"Yeah," I said. Constantine must have been a changed man by the time he built it, which, according to scholars who specialize in it, was sometime in the 330s. He'd murdered his wife and son in 326, and then fled to the vineyards in Byzantium to heal – at least that's why I think he went there. He must have lived in torment for some time, but eventually found peace there among the vines. He became close to the family he had left, perhaps most especially his daughter Costanza. The décor of the mausoleum he built for her suggests that he loved her dearly, and that he believed the afterlife to be a warm, joyful place.

We stepped inside a ring of columned archways into the central space of the mausoleum, where Costanza's sarcophagus lies. It's made from a precious, wine-red Egyptian stone called porphyry, and is carved with smiling cherubs picking bunches of grapes and putting them into baskets. This harvest scene is framed by flowing vines, and above them is the face of a man who looks very much like the Bacchus on the *Chi-Rho* amphora – his head crowned with grapes. I think this may be how Constantine saw Christ in one of his forms – as Bacchus with a halo of grapes.

When I saw the image of Bacchus carved into the sarcophagus that Constantine made for his daughter, I thought of a letter the ancient historian Plutarch wrote after hearing the news that his own little daughter had died. To his wife, he wrote:

About that which you have heard, dear heart, that the soul once departed from the body vanishes and feels nothing, I know that you do not believe such assertions because of those sacred and faithful promises given in the Mysteries of Bacchus, which we who are of that religious brotherhood know. We hold it for a firm, undoubted truth that our soul is incorruptible and immortal. We are to think of the dead that they pass into a better place and a happier condition.

Let us behave accordingly, outwardly ordering our lives, while within all should be purer, wiser, and incorruptible.

Not much more is known about the Mysteries of Bacchus than Plutarch gives us in his letter, because it was forbidden for members to speak or write openly about it, at least in any detail. Cicero, who had also been initiated into the Mysteries, says only that the secret knowledge helped one "to live with joy and to die with hope." Perhaps he spoke, in part, about the wisdom of the vine, which dies in winter and is reborn in spring. Or of the sun that feeds the vine, which is extinguished each night and rises again every morning, unconquered.

Chapter 13

Larissa was home when we returned, and she and I argued. She said that her friend at the Culture Ministry had promised that there would be no formal investigation or arrests as long as the illegal digging stopped immediately, and anything that had been taken was brought to the Ministry at once.

"Who the fuck is *he*?" Dario yelled over the phone.

"I don't know," I said. "But my friend trusts him."

"Trust?" Dario shouted. I could hear the sound of car horns in the background. He must've been stuck in traffic. He said, "How can I trust what came from the asshole who turned us in? And you, *merduso*, leaving those photos out for every asshole to see. I should fucking kill you. If I go to jail for this – "

"*Calma*, Dario," I said. "All you have to do is stop digging. You said you were thinking about doing that anyway."

"I never said that, *stronzo*," Dario shouted.

"Listen," I said, "you didn't take anything out, so just stay away from the place, and – "

"But we did, you fuck. We took them out."

I said, "You took the amphorae out? But, I thought you were at the vineyard. Which ones did you take out?"

"The good ones. What do you think?"

"You mean the Bacchus one, the sheep one, and the, uh –"

"Si, si, the only three that weren't broken into a hundred fucking pieces. We took them out."

"Shit, Dario," I said, "you have to give them to the guy at the Ministry. Now."

"So he can sell them and make money off my hard work? He can go fuck himself up his own asshole instead."

"Dario, please. You have to return the amphorae right now or they'll investigate, and they'll –"

"What are they gonna do?" Dario said. "*Niente*. This is August. Half the cops are on vacation; the other half don't give a shit."

"You should take this seriously," I said. "You have to give back the –"

"We'll talk about it later," he said.

"When?" I asked.

"I'm coming down in a few days to do some work on the building and show the new apartment. I'll see you and your stupid ass then." He hung up.

I didn't talk to Dario again for a week and a half. He kept putting me off, saying he was busy but to let him know if I heard anything else about the Ministry.

During that time, I wrote my proposal for Berkeley Press, outlining the research we'd done. I sent it to Peggy on August 12th, giving her a week to read it before our Skype appointment on the 19th – the day of the *Vinalia*.

Since I hadn't heard anything from Dario, I began to assume I was no longer invited to the Vinalia, which, given the recent developments, came as a relief – although I was sorry I'd be missing a chance to see Elisabetta.

But I was wrong. On August 18th, Dario texted me, saying he'd pick me the next afternoon, and we'd drive up to the vineyard together. At first, I wondered if I should make an excuse and get out of it, but my guilt about the Cultural Ministry kept me from doing it.

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When he picked me up, he was obviously still angry. I tried to talk to him, but he hardly said a word to me the whole drive up.

After an hour of silence on the highway, Dario turned onto a narrow road that wound into steep, vineyard-covered hills. Eventually, we crested one of the largest hills and entered a village so small that it only took about ten seconds to drive through it. Then we were at Dario's uncle's country place, an old stone farmhouse with a barn and a few other structures adjoining it, all overlooking the vineyards that covered the hillside.

Dario parked between a couple of other cars in front of the farmhouse, and we got out. I asked where Elisabetta was, and he swung his arm roughly in the direction of the barn. He didn't even bother to look at me; he just walked into the house with his bags.

The barn smelled like hay, which was spread between rows of amphorae that were dug into the dirt floor. Elisabetta was bent over scrubbing the inside of an empty amphora, but she looked up when I walked in. She came over to me and we gave each other long, sweaty kisses. We were

laughing, too, not for any particular reason, really; we were just happy. Then we walked around a little while she showed me the place.

"This is a pure home for the wine," she said, running her hand along the rim of an amphora. "It's earth mixed with water and shaped by hands. Then it's baked in fire, and dried in the air. Very simple. The wine expresses clearly through it."

"You make these yourself?" I asked.

"No, no," she said. "These come from a woman in town. She has a workshop with her sons. But," she said with a little smile, "I'm trying to make my own. With shapes inspired by the amphorae in Testaccio."

"Really?" I said. "Can I see them?"

"No!" she said, laughing. "They're not ready yet. I'll show you the next time you visit. Soon, I hope."

"Soon," I said. She tugged on my arm, and we out the back door of the barn toward some pens with sheep and goats in them.

"We don't normally keep them here," Elisabetta said, pointing to the animals. "We like to let them wander the vineyard. They recharge the land and the vines. But if the animals are sick and need care, or if we choose them to eat them, they stay here."

We stopped in front of a pen with a white lamb inside. The little thing was drinking water. It looked about as innocent and adorable as it could have.

Now, way back at Dario's party, I'd agreed to participate in the sacrificial ritual acting as the *flamens*. He's the one who says a prayer in Latin, and then offers the lamb to Jove by killing it.

But, looking down at the lamb, I didn't think I could do it.

When Elisabetta said she would do it, I wasn't sure I could go along with that either. So we talked about it a little.

She said she'd been a vegetarian until she met her ex-husband. He was a spiritual man, she said, who owned pastures and a slaughterhouse in the Sidon District just outside of Beirut. He'd taught her how to connect with the animals, to calm them, and only when they were relaxed and at peace, which she called 'acceptance,' only then could they be sacrificed.

She said that the busiest time of year for them – the three years she was with him – was during the Festival of the Sacrifice, which honors the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son. She said hundreds of sheep of different ages were ritually sacrificed for that, and the smell of all that blood, of the feces and urine, was one of the strongest sensations she'd ever encountered. The experience seemed to have hardened her; that's what I thought at the time, anyway. But maybe it was just that she'd come to some kind of agreement inside of herself about life and death, about how we take life to feed our own, and how when we die our flesh will feed the worms, and the grass, and everything else that grows up around our bones.

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While we were talking, we walked into the main farmhouse to get a drink of water. Dario was inside the house, ordering around some of the actors who'd been at his party. He was yelling at them to take "all that Gypsy shit" out of the house. It took me awhile to get what was going on, but I finally understood that his uncle's new wife, or as Dario called her, "that fucking hippy bitch," had decorated the farmhouse with decorations from the East. The walls were hung with

mandalas, and the shelves and tables were covered with statuettes of Buddha sitting in meditation, or of Kali with swords in her many hands.

What was funny about it was that Dario kept shouting, *Attenzione, eh!* every time he thought someone wasn't using the utmost care with his new aunt's things. He also had everyone take pictures, with their phones, of the positions of the statuettes and other things before they moved them. That way, they could put them back in the exact same position later.

After the house was cleared to Dario's satisfaction, a skinny young guy wearing Egyptian-style makeup took me up to one of the bedrooms upstairs and fitted me with a toga. Despite a few stains, the heavy, rough wool it was made from looked and felt authentic. He even gave me the correct *flamens*' hat – the *apex* – which is shaped like a thumbtack and is worn with the point raised up toward the heavens.

When he was finished with me, I ran into Ugo in the hallway. It was the first time I'd seen him since Dario's party. He had on a leather breastplate and was holding a plumed Centurion's helmet under his arm. I laughed when I saw him but said he looked *bello*. He didn't register the compliment, or see anything remotely funny about the situation; he just nodded seriously to me in response.

As I watched him walk past me toward the stairway, I saw that his ear had been pierced – recently, apparently, because it was red and swollen – with a gold lightning bolt. I opened my mouth to say something about it, but thought better of it. He seemed very focused and not in the mood for talking.

An hour later, I was leading a procession down the slope below the farmhouse. It was difficult to walk on the uneven ground between the rows of vines without stumbling over my toga, but I was

especially careful because I was carrying the lamb in a sling around my middle, the kind in which you see mothers carrying their infants. Elisabetta rigged it for me when she saw how much trouble I was having holding onto the lamb.

Directly behind me was Dario, dressed in a toga with a purple senatorial stripe; and following him were Ugo, the actors, and a few others, people around my age, who I'd also seen at Dario's party.

On a plateau was a pergola wrapped in vines that were laden with purple Sangiovese grapes. Sangiovese means "blood of Jove." The grapes have been cultivated in the area and pressed to make wine since at least as far back as the Etruscans.

Underneath the pergola was a worn, U-shaped stone altar. Dario had bragged at the party that it was from the 5th century BCE. I've never been able to confirm that; the only thing I could find, when I researched it later, was that a Republican-era statue and some clay votives had apparently been unearthed in the area by the locals in the 1970s. But no archaeologists seemed to have followed up. This isn't too surprising given the amount of antiquities in the ground in Italy, and the comparative paucity of university and government resources that can be tapped to fund legit digs.

The altar appeared to have been placed by the ancients to face Arcturus, which in August is the brightest star in the sky. We know from Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* that the ancients used the star's appearance to signal the beginning of the grape harvest, which they celebrated with a sacrifice to Jove as part of the Vinalia festival.

I'm not saying all the Romans believed the star was sent by Jove to tell them to start harvesting their grapes; but many Romans, I think, felt some connection to the heavens and to the earth.

I'm used to living in the city where I rarely see the stars, at least not clearly. I'm not usually aware of their connection with the earth and events like the harvest. I'm barely conscious of any harvests, for that matter, even though I consume grain, fruits and other growing things every day.

But as I approached the altar with Arcturus shining in the darkening sky, I felt a little closer to those things.

Elisabetta was already standing there when I led the procession up to the altar. Her graying hair was loose under a wreath of vine and grapes, and her Roman stola hugged her body's curves. She looked at home playing the part of a priestess of Bacchus, Jove's favorite son.

I stopped directly across from Elisabetta and reached into my pouch to take out the lamb. While it squirmed in my hands, I said in Latin, "Blood is life." Then I knelt down, putting the lamb gently on his side onto the center of the altar, and held his legs the way Elisabetta had showed me to do. I didn't handle him well, though, and he squawked in protest until Elisabetta calmed him down by pressing down on him, not hard, but confidently, while she sang a quiet song.

Then she pulled the lamb's long ears over his eyes, holding them in place very lightly with two fingers. I looked at his chest; he'd begun breathing slowly, peacefully. Elisabetta began to sing a little louder, and I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Dario and Ugo, and some of the others creeping in closer to us. I could sense the intensity of their feelings and stares as they watched.

A few of the actors began humming along with Elisabetta's song. The rhythm was simple and repetitive, I also started to hum along with the other voices. With two fingers of one hand

still holding the lamb's ears over his eyes, Elisabetta took a knife from underneath a cloth on the altar and brought it to the lamb's neck.

I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. We were all holding our breath as Elisabetta made a deep, lightning-fast forward cut, severing the lamb's jugular and carotid arteries and his windpipe – then she pulled the knife immediately back with another stroke to make sure she'd cut deeply enough.

I gasped, everyone did, as we watched soft flaps of wooly skin parting and blood gush out from between them. I wanted to cry and scream and laugh all at the same time while I kneeled there, holding on tight to the lamb's convulsing legs. Piss and watery shit sprayed on my hands and toga, and Elisabetta thrust a terracotta bowl under the lamb's neck, catching the blood.

The lamb stopped moving, and I noticed a terrible stench rising from the blood and shit, but I remembered what I was supposed to do. I stood up and asked Jove to bless the harvest, and I pulled a bunch of grapes off the vine hanging from the pergola above me. Ugo, Dario and everyone else shouted, and clapped, and then picked their own grapes from the hanging vines.

Starting with Dario (of course), they took turns putting grapes on the altar, whispering prayers and wishes as they did it. When it was Ugo's turn, he took up the knife Elisabetta had left on the altar and raised it up to his swollen red earlobe. I was staring at him, open-mouthed, and I heard a few voices, one of them, Elisabetta's, telling him to put the knife down, but he suddenly shouted *Giove* like some kind of battle cry and sliced off his earlobe.

Somebody screamed, and as blood gushed from the wound, I could hear groans around me. I watched Ugo lean over the altar, his face a mask of gritted teeth and sweat, squeezing his ear so his blood flowed onto the stone, mixing with the lamb's blood.

After a few moments, Dario, who must've known what Ugo was going to do, because he didn't look surprised at all, took the knife from Ugo's hand. He knelt down next to the lamb and cut into its belly. He fished around inside it and pulled out its bloody liver, which he scrutinized.

Divining the future from the contours and color of a sacrificial animal's liver was a special art in ancient Rome, which Dario claimed to have studied. Different sections of the liver correspond to planets, stars, or entire constellations; a divot in one area, or a discolored engorgement in another will determine whether or not the god has accepted the sacrifice.

Dario fondled the bloody pulp, squeezing and smelling it, before raising it above his head and nodding and looking around at everyone with a big, proud smile on his face. A few people clapped and Dario knelt back down to tear out the lamb's heart, spleen, and kidneys. He put them on one side of the altar, poured black pitch over them, and set them on fire. Oily smoke rose up, taking the animal's vitals up into the sky.

Elisabetta picked up the lamb's carcass, and I lifted the blood-filled terracotta bowl, and we walked together into the rows of vines, drizzling blood into the soil.

Everyone else went back up to the farmhouse, and we were the only ones left outside under the stars. The quiet, along with the light wind that travels through those hills in summer, gave everything a dreamy feel.

When we'd finished, we took what was left of the lamb back up the slope into a shed next to the barn where Elisabetta hung him up to let his blood drain out. While he was hanging there dripping blood, we talked about sacrifice. I said even though I'd studied sacrifice, I never felt like I understood it with any real depth. She told me that she wasn't sure, either, but that for her ex-husband it meant this: offering something brings you closer to the receiver – in his case, Allah. She said, also, that it puts you in a certain mindset, one of thankfulness.

Although I wasn't totally satisfied by this explanation, I liked it more than the traditional one, which is basically that sacrifice is a kind of divine bribe.

Elisabetta started to skin the lamb, and I asked if I could help, but more out of politeness than any real desire to do it. I felt a little sick. I think she noticed because she told me to go clean up and that she'd see me after she butchered the lamb and roasted it.

*

Once I was back in the farmhouse, I had to wait for the upstairs shower to open up. When I got in there, of course, there was no hot water left. I scrubbed quickly, getting as much of the blood and everything else off of myself as I could.

Then I put on another toga – this one was tight around my stomach and too short, but the costumer didn't have any bigger ones to choose from. I probably looked a little silly, but there was nothing to be done about it, so I went downstairs to get a drink.

I could barely get to the refrigerator because the small kitchen was full of people cooking while they jabbered away in Italian. The place was sweltering because the ovens and stove were going full blast.

As I was opening the fridge, someone told me that drinks and glasses were already set up in the living room. I was glad to hear it. I wanted to get out of that inferno right away, and didn't want to have to come back every time I wanted a drink.

The living room, which was decent-sized, was still warm but felt all right because the large windows were open, letting in some air. But they were also letting in mosquitoes by the

dozen because they weren't fitted with screens – an invention which never caught on in Italy and other parts of Europe, which is something I'll never understand.

The little blood suckers were collecting in small clouds around the tops of two open amphorae that had been brought in from the barn. I waved them out of the way as best I could, then ladled myself a full glass out of an amphora that had the same floral, peachy wine we'd had at Dario's party. The amphora next to it was full of red wine, a special Sangiovese that Elisabetta had reserved for the ceremony.

I stood there with my drink, watching people around me move furniture and set down plates and utensils. I felt guilty for not helping, but I needed a minute. I felt exhausted, and was having trouble mustering the energy even to lift the glass to my lips.

In my mind, I was sucked into an image of Gandalf falling through the dark depths of time and space, grappling with his demon; and I was only pulled back into the room by a nagging irritation. A mosquito was on my forearm, its body rocking back and forth as it took a bit of my life into its own.

I swatted it, leaving a blood smear around the mosquito's flattened body, which I flicked off like the giant god I must've seemed to the thing when it landed on me. I took a long sip from my glass and let the cool wine swirl through my mouth and slide down my throat; and I felt a little better. I could focus again. I saw Dario and other people coming into the room from other parts of the house, and they clustered around the amphorae, pouring wine, spilling it, getting yelled at by Dario – and then we all sat down in a mishmash of couches, side tables, and folding chairs.

Dario, holding an enormous goblet, stood up in front of us and began the banquet by reciting his rendition of the ancient poet Horace's *Ode to a Wine Jar:*

Wine, born like me under cloud and sun,

You bring violent quarrel and joyful pun,

Heavy dispute and passionate fondling,

Easy sleep, and colorful dreaming.

Jar, you preserved this excellent wine,

You bade Jove on high climb down his vine,

Descend, Jove, come forth and dine,

Come forth and share this cup of mine.

Dario laughed, and we were clapping for him when the cooks brought in the first course. It was a classic dish for a Roman banquet: sautéed dormice drizzled with honey and sprinkled with poppy seeds.

As Dario announced the next ancient poem he would recite – Catullus' *Pedicabo Ego Vos Et Irrumabo* – a couple of the actors were setting down wide vases and long feathers next to everyone. At ancient banquets, the Romans would stick the feathers down their throats, or have their slaves do it, to induce vomiting after each course to make room for the next one. Although I wasn't planning on doing it myself, I admit I was curious to see who actually would. Ugo ended up being the only person who did it, several times. It got increasingly difficult for him, I could tell. It was hard for us, too, having to see, hear, and smell his retching. Still, he did it methodically after every course out of an exaggerated urge, I assume, to honor the ancient tradition.

Dario began the poem, but he didn't just recite it – he acted it out, mostly with pelvic thrusts:

I'll fuck your face and rape your ass,

Cocksucking Aurelius and bottom-boy Furius,

You who think, from my verses,

because they're soft, that I've got no shame.

Yes, you're right that a devoted poet is chaste,

But his words shouldn't be. To have real flavor,

They must be sensual and crude; they must

incite an itch, and I don't mean only in boys, but in those

hairy old men who can't get it up, too.

Just because you've collected a thousand of my kisses,

you think that as a man, I'm any less?

I'll fuck your face and rape your ass!

While people laughed at Dario's performance, the costumer and another one of the guys carried in a silver-painted skeleton reclining on a chaise. It was customary to have a skeleton as one of the guests at Roman banquets to remind people that death was a constant companion. But it wasn't meant to be grim; it was festive. The Romans never let death ruin a good time. They welcomed it to come in and join the party.

Dario sat down between me and the skeleton. The *flamens* and the skeleton, being the most honored guests, sat on either side of the host. Then he raised his glass and toasted the skeleton, quoting the famous Roman banquet host, Trimalchio:

O woe, woe! Man is just a dot,

Hades drags us off and that is our lot.

So let us live a little space,

At least while we can feed our face.

We all drank in the skeleton's honor, and started eating.

I looked around the room. Most likely, at least one person in that room, maybe two or three people, had cancer or some other serious condition. But everyone was laughing, eating, drinking, and enjoying the others around them. Even Ugo looked to be in good spirits, despite his bandaged ear, which must have been throbbing in pain. He wasn't letting it stop him from clapping his hands to a song started up by one of the actors, who was strumming a lyre.

The next two courses were egg and meat dishes covered with either honey, or with garum, which is fermented fish sauce the Romans loved to put on everything. It's got an explosive fishy tang to it that really sticks with you, maybe a little too much.

The most striking dish of the dinner came in later on a big round platter that was split into twelve sections, like pizza slices, with each one representing a sign of the zodiac. The concept wasn't original – it was straight out of *The Satyricon* – but it was fun to actually see it right there in front of me and to taste it.

For Taurus there was steak; for Gemini there were pairs of sheep's testicles covered in garum; for Pisces there were actually little live minnows swimming in cold stew, which was both sick and impressive, and so on. Each person got a helping of whatever their sign was.

I'm a Scorpio, and so I got the fried scorpions, which tasted like thick, crunchy potato chips. While I was eating those, I'd started talking to Dario next to me. He was finally acting normal with me, maybe because of the wine and all the celebrating going on around us. He was also eating scorpion. One of us, I can't remember which, brought up the common ancient slander that all Scorpios are either prisoners or cutthroats, and we both said, somewhat drunkenly, what total bullshit it was – although now I can see that there was some truth to it.

Elisabetta came in around then, still in her bloody stola. She was carrying our roasted lamb on a dish. People got quiet, while I went over to the amphora in the corner and filled a pitcher of Sangiovese.

Then Elisabetta and I circulated around the room, with me pouring wine into each person's glass right after they took a piece of lamb from Elisabetta's dish. People whispered "*Grazie,*" as they were being served, and they kept repeating it, so that by the time we were finished, the room was echoing with what had become a sort of chant.

We sat back down, and people slowly quieted. Everyone had eyes on Elisabetta, and when she put a piece of lamb's meat in her mouth, everybody else took that as a cue to start eating, too.

The meat was delicate and full of flavor. The wine was very dark red with a tinge of brown – the color you might see in a clay soil if you dug deep enough. And when I sipped it, the wine gave the lamb a whole other dimension of liveliness in my mouth.

After a while, I got up to refill my wine, and, moving around, I realized I had to go to the bathroom, which I did. While I was in there, I checked my phone and was surprised to see it was almost time for my Skype call with Peggy.

I went straight up to my room and wiggled out of the top half of my toga so it was hanging around my waist. Then put on a button-down shirt, since Peggy would see me from the waist up on her screen. I got out my computer and tried to get online, but I couldn't get an Internet connection there, so walked around the upstairs looking for a router.

I spotted one under an antique desk in a study at the end of the hallway, and I sat down in a loveseat across from it to try my computer again. I was relieved to see that the Internet actually worked.

Then I tested my computer's camera, to see what Peggy would see behind me. The wall behind the loveseat was no good – it had a great big Tibetan mandala hanging on it. It's not that I didn't like it; it was full of greens and reds and different geometric shapes, but I wanted Peggy to see something different, something quintessentially Italian. The best I could do was drag the desk a few feet over so that when I sat there, the rustic window and part of the bookcase would be visible behind me.

After I logged on and double-checked the view from my computer's camera, I got up and went to the door of the study. I could hear music coming from downstairs – someone had turned on the stereo, and there was laughing and probably dancing. The modern party had begun. I was looking forward to going back down after the call. I closed the old door and would have locked it if I could have found the key. I promise I'd made at Dario's party was floating around in the back of my head – even though no one had brought it up since, and it seemed not to exist in reality, but only as part of a vague, surreal fantasy.

I still had a few minutes left before the call, and I paced for a while, practicing what I would say, and getting increasingly jittery. Then I went back to the desk and with a shaking finger, I pressed the button dialing Peggy Talbot in California, where it was 1pm.

Seconds later, Peggy's voice through my computer's speakers.

"Hello, Joseph?" she said. "Are you there?"

"Yes, hi, Peggy," I said, but I couldn't see her. "I can't – "

"I can't see you," she said.

"I know, maybe it's the connection," I said, although I didn't think she heard me. The audio seemed to have cut out.

A moment later, the audio was back, and there was Peggy on the screen, in pointy glasses and a shapeless lavender suit. She told me that because early Christianity was out of her wheelhouse, she'd invited someone else to join our call, too. His name was Dimitrios Kousoulas, from the Religious Studies Department at Berkeley, and he'd been kind enough, she said, to read through my proposal. He must've owed her a favor.

I'd only met Dimitrios once, at a conference, but I was familiar with him. He was known for his active listening, you might call it, at talks given by other academics. I'd seen him in the audience, grimacing and snorting his way through more than one talk.

Peggy and I made small talk for a few minutes while we waited for Dimitrios, who was late. She was doing well, she said, getting ready to go to Mexico City for ten days, which she was looking forward to. And while she was telling me about that, Dimitrios – hunched, bald, and staring – appeared in the corner of my screen.

"Good," Peggy said. "Thank you for joining us, Dr. Kousoulas."

Dimitrios nodded but didn't smile.

"Hi Dimitrios," I said, mustering what enthusiasm I could.

There was no response. I cleared my throat. "How are you?"

"Busy," he said curtly.

There was another uncomfortable silence; then Peggy jumped in. "We know how late it is for you, Joseph, in Italy. And Dr. Kousoulas has a meeting soon, I believe. So let's begin."

"Great," I said.

"First, Joseph, I want to tell you how much I appreciate your sending this new proposal. You've come a long way in a short time, in terms of your research. You've also a taken a surprising turn away from your normal area of study."

Dimitrios broke in. “I wouldn’t call it surprising so much as shocking. All your previous research – and I’m looking at it here – is, ah, Classical era. I think the latest emperor you’ve published on,” I heard papers shuffling, “is Marcus Aurelius. That right?”

“Not quite,” I said. “My last journal article dealt with changing trade routes during Caracalla’s reign.”

“But,” he said, “that’s still an entire century before Constantine.”

“That’s true, yes. It’s where the research was.”

“In unfamiliar waters, you mean,” he said.

“Not exactly,” I said, turning my head slightly. Dario had come into the study, and was sitting down in the loveseat. “Well, yes,” I told Dimitrios, “unfamiliar to a degree. But it’s still close enough to my area to give me substantial context.”

“Uh, huh,” Dimitrios said doubtfully.

Peggy spoke. “We have a couple of questions, Joseph. If you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” I said, trying to sound calm.

“I’d like to start,” Dimitrios said, “by trying to clarify the premise of your proposal.” He cleared his throat. “You’ve got a few different threads here, but you seem to be saying overall that Constantine wasn’t a Christian so much as he was a, ah,” – Dimitrios grimaced slightly – “a, ah, worshipper of wine. And of the sun. Which is a surprising claim in itself, but doubly so because I don’t think you mention Jesus more than once or twice in the entire draft.” He shook his head incredulously. “We’re talking about the same Constantine, aren’t we? The first Christian Emperor? The political architect of that not-insignificant socio-religious structure known as Christendom?”

"Yes," I said flatly. "I don't know exactly how many times I mention Jesus in my proposal, but Christ has a central position in my premise."

I lost focus for a second because Dimitrios was wagging his head from side to side. I said, "The idea of wine as divine blood existed before Christianity. So did sun worship. I think Constantine believed that Christ was a third aspect that joined with Sol and Bacchus to create a different sort of trinity –"

Dimitrios jumped in. "No, no, you're describing paganism – the belief in more than one god. That's strictly contrary to Christian thought, both then and now."

"That's a gray area, right there," I said. "Constantine's time was a period of transition between paganism and Christianity – which were different from each other, yes, but they also had similarities – "

Dimitrios broke in again. "You can't say that Constantine worshipped Sol and Bacchus, and that he was a devout Christian at the same time. If you'd studied the early Christian writers at all, the ones who were companions of Constantine, and instructed him, you'd know that they absolutely condemned any form of worship, in thought or action, of the pagan gods. There's no gray area there. It's cut and dry."

"There was plenty of gray," I said. "The whole reason the Christian writers spoke out against the belief in multiple gods was because it was so prevalent. If you'd studied the pagans at all, you'd know that they could believe in Sol, Jove, Bacchus, Diana, Juno – you name it – as well as their household gods, all at the same time. There was an openness that – "

"A lack of focus, you mean," Dimitrios said. "That's exactly what Constantine rejected. After he became a Christian, he starved the pagan temples of their support, and he began a robust

program of church building. His churches stood for a *uniform set of beliefs*, which he himself helped to codify at the Council of Nicaea."

"But Dimitrios," I said, "he didn't just, one day out of the blue, abort all the beliefs he grew up with. Nobody does that. There's always some kind of continuity – "

"What do you think happened at the Milvian Bridge?" Dimitrios retorted.

"I'll tell you what happened," I said. "He looked up at the sun and saw his old friend Sol Invictus there, who'd helped him win battles in the past. But Constantine knew this battle was different, he needed more power. So he changed, to a degree. He knew the Empire had been falling apart for years, and he could see that Sol and Jove and the other old gods weren't cutting it anymore. Not on their own. The Empire, the world, needed new blood and a new perspective. So he brought Christ into the mix, who gave him an edge, and who gave him a new way, maybe even a deeper way, of looking at things."

Dimitrios threw himself back in his chair. "He did much, much more than just bring Christ into the mix."

"You're right," I said. "He gave Christ the top spot in his personal pantheon, but his old gods didn't just disappear. Eusebius says that when Constantine was at the Milvian Bridge he saw a cross arising from the light of the sun. Constantine carried forward his belief in Sol and connected it to Christ. He did the same thing with wine. He'd seen it growing up as the blood of Jove, and of Jove's son, Bacchus. And later, he saw wine transformed into Christ's blood, too."

"Not transformed, *transubstantiated*," Dimitrios corrected. "But regardless of whether or not Constantine believed in Sol and Jove or Bacchus or whomever, the fact is that he stopped doing so at the Milvian Bridge. Because believing in Sol and believing in Christ are two very different things."

"You keep saying that," I said, "but if you look at the sarcophagus Constantine built for his daughter at Santa Costanza, with Bacchus' head covered by a wreath of grapes – that's traditional pagan imagery. I think he saw Bacchus as a real part of the divine presence. If Constantine had totally rejected Bacchus, he would have stuck to established Christian imagery, so as not to muddy the waters. But the waters *were* muddy."

"I'm glad you brought up Santa Costanza." Dimitrios said, "You're aware of the new research suggesting that it may not have been Constantine who commissioned the sarcophagus, but that it may have been Julian the Apostate."

"I'm aware of that theory," I said. "But this is one of the few places I'm with the traditionalists. I think Constantine himself, not someone else, built his daughter's mausoleum, and that it reflected the views that he held as he was getting older. About life, death, God, and everything else."

"I've read your opinions on Santa Costanza," Dimitrios said. "And I think you're reading much more into it than is actually there."

I heard a shuffling of papers, and Dimitrios continued. "Similarly, you find a tremendous amount of significance in the events of the summer of 326 in your – ah, research. You say here that the personal trauma Constantine suffered after the deaths of his wife and son caused him to leave Rome, and that his destination was determined by his obsession with a certain wine made by a, ah – a Sidonia Pompeia. And that when Constantine arrived at her vineyards, he stayed there, and the new capital of the Empire simply grew up around him like a weed."

"I think of it more as a vine," I said.

Dimitrios sniffed loudly. “That’s, ah, quite a claim. But the supposed evidence for it – the amphorae in Testaccio buried while Constantine happened to be staying in Rome – I don’t see how that’s anything more than circumstantial.”

“It shows that Constantine was drinking Sidonia’s wine almost exclusively,” I said. “It obviously meant something special to him. After he killed his wife and son, Constantine must have been horribly distraught, which he probably deserved. I think he was desperate to heal, to find comfort and forgiveness. So he went to the source of the thing that had comforted him and had given him inspiration in his most trying moments.”

“Constantine,” said Dimitrios calmly, “was a pragmatist. To say that a man like that made a major political decision – *the* political decision of his era – based on his personal taste in wine, is ridiculous. And to say that drinking this wine from the Golden Horn inspired his vision at bridge, too – well, I think it ascribes far too much power to the wine, while undermining the spiritual significance of the event.”

I looked back at Dario, who was sitting on the couch, listening. I thought of what we’d done that evening with the sacrifice and the ceremony, and I said, “Wine is an incredibly powerful and ancient spiritual symbol – in fact, it’s much more than just a symbol. It’s rooted to the earth and nurtured by the sky. You can smell it, taste it, be inspired by it. Even transformed, if you believe in that sort of thing. Didn’t you see Paul Giamatti’s monologue in *Sideways*, where he talks about Pinot? Come on, Dimitrios, wine can be a powerful thing, don’t you believe that?”

I must have caught him by surprise with the last thing I said, because he cracked a smile.

“We have Napa wines up here,” he said. “There are some that’ll lift you up and show you a few things. But fmy subjective experience is hardly evidence for your theory. At least not the kind of evidence that belongs in a scholarly book.”

"I'm not asking you to consider that as evidence," I said. "That's only the conceptual part I'm hanging the evidence on, which is physical. The passage from the Edict of Diocletian shows a clear connection between the vineyard on the Golden Horn and the *Chi-Rho* amphorae here in Rome. And Constantine – "

"Let me stop you right there," Dimitrios said. "These *Chi-Rho* amphorae, as you call them – they're not evidence either. No authority that I recognize has studied them, or documented that they are what you say they are."

"Yes," Peggy chimed in. "I think it's important that we understand the state of the excavation in order to confirm the veracity of the conclusions you've drawn from it."

"Indeed," Dimitrios said.

I could feel Dario staring at me from the couch. I said, "As I wrote in my proposal, the Italian Ministry of Culture has only just taken over the site, and there hasn't been time for any archaeologists or academics to look at the site yet. But they're not the only people with eyes and brains and tools. Why should we totally discount the work that's already been done there? Just because it wasn't done by someone with official training?"

"There has to be a standard," Dimitrios said.

"Of course," I said. "But the people who dug up the *Chi-Rho* amphorae have an expertise of their own. They have knowledge going back generations, and a familiarity with the land – a love of the land – " I tried not to look at Dario, "even if that love is abusive at times. But for all its faults, we can't just throw it away like it was nothing."

Dimitrios scrunched up one of his eyes, but didn't say anything.

Instead, it was Peggy who spoke. “I have to agree with Dr. Kousoulas,” she said. “We hold journals to the standard of peer review, and we have to do the same with the excavation in question.”

I could hear Dimitrios sighing.

Peggy said, “Is there anything else we should know about that you didn’t mention in your draft?”

“That’s pretty much everything,” I said. “For now, at least.”

“OK,” Peggy said. “I think I’ve got a clear understanding of where things stand.”

“Great,” I lied.

“I’d like to congratulate you,” she continued, “for questioning some long-held assumptions about Constantine and his founding of Constantinople as the Empire’s new capital. Right now, though, I have to agree with Dimitrios – your research needs greater bolstering in terms of evidence confirmed by academia. But I’m certain that with more time, you’ll be able to do that. Which is why I’m going to ask you to revise and resubmit another draft when you have something significant to add.”

Of course, I thought. There was no other way this could have gone.

“Are you there, Joseph?”

“Yes,” I said, deadpan. “Thanks for your – Peggy I don’t have time to revise and resubmit. I need a book contract, or I’ll lose my job.”

Dimitrios was strangely silent. I like to think it was his way of responding sympathetically.

Peggy said, “I’m aware of your situation, and I wish I could help. I really do. But there are standards that we have to maintain. I’m sure you understand that. Continue with your

research, get it on more solid ground, and it'll be considered again. It's just going to take more time and work, unfortunately."

I numbly thanked her and Dimitrios, we said goodbye, and I closed my laptop. I stared at it for a few moments, not sure what I was feeling, or what to do next. Then I swiveled the chair slowly around to face Dario, who was still sitting on the couch, wine glass in hand.

"Well," I said.

"You look like you need a drink," he said, getting up and going to the door.

I started to stand up, but he motioned for me to stop. "I'll bring it to you."

"That's okay," I said. "I can come down and get it myself." The music from the living room had grown louder and was thumping away, accompanied by shouts and laughter.

"No, no," he said. "I insist that you accept the hospitality of the house." Then he left, and when he closed the door, I thought I heard an extra clicking noise. But I wasn't sure because of all the racket coming from downstairs.

I sat there, frozen, while my mind churned away trying to figure out what to do. Should I sneak out of the house, start jogging along the road into the town, tripping over my toga skirt as I waved my arms like a crazy person trying to flag down a car, and told the driver that my friend was coming after me to tie a lute-string around my penis – when he was actually bringing me a glass of wine?

But although I tried to talk myself out of it, I felt that I was in danger. I was feeling very heavy, and it took a lot just to get myself up out of my chair.

I looked out the window behind me. The night was clear and dark outside; I could see lots of stars, and I could smell the country in the cool air coming from outside. There was no ledge,

just a drop far enough down to do serious injury if I jumped. Of course I might be lucky, like I had been when I was trying to hang glide.

There were no people outside – no Elisabetta strolling on the edge of the vineyard, no festival guests drunkenly staggering outside to have sex. No one to call down to. I'd leave, I thought. And my body began to move toward the door – the door that Dario was opening.

He was carrying a bag, and behind him was Ugo, with an amphora in his arms.

I didn't yell, and I didn't try to fight. I don't know that I'll ever understand my reaction, but I've wondered about it often.

It makes me think of something that happened in Rome during World War II – something that I hesitate to bring up because it's very serious, but I do it hoping to shed a thin sliver of light on the way I was feeling and behaving.

During the last months of the German occupation, members of the Communist-dominated *Gruppo d'Azione Patriottica* set up an IED on a little street near the Spanish Steps that they knew a group of German SS policemen were heading toward as part of small parade. How the SS men had come to be there is another story, but suffice to say they were actually Italian born, from the South Tyrol, and had chosen membership in the SS rather than be sent to the Eastern front to fight against the Russians.

Still, their parade was meant to intimidate the citizens of Rome and repress the Resistance; all it did, though, was give the Resistance an opportunity. While the SS men were approaching, singing through the list of patriotic German songs their superiors had organized for them, the IED was pushed into the road by a partisan disguised as a street sweeper. It exploded on cue, killing 28 SS men, and possibly also two bystanders, one of whom was an eleven year-

old boy. Although he may have been killed when the SS men started blindly firing their guns after the explosion.

The official German response was not swift, but eventually Hitler himself demanded that ten Italians be killed for each of his soldiers. 335 Italian men and teenage boys were eventually rounded up, a quarter of them Jews, by a mixed force of Germans and Italian fascists. They were taken in trucks to a old quarry that was near the Catacombs of St. Callixtus, where Christian martyrs had been buried during Constantine's time.

Inside the quarry were old tunnels and caves, and SS men brought the Italians into them five at a time. The SS men, holding guns, ordered the Italians to kneel down and face the wall. The plan was for each designated SS man to put his pistol to the back of the head of the Italian in front of him and blast a bullet into the cerebellum, which would require only one bullet.

It wasn't a simple operation. Most of the SS men hadn't killed before, and cases of cognac were sent along in the trucks to help steel their nerves against the horror they'd been ordered to commit.

Not all of them could do it. But, for the most part, the SS men carried out their orders, which is probably the most sanitized way to describe what they did. It makes them sound stalwart, like they did something difficult but necessary – like all of us who live in the real world must do at times – and that they should be congratulated, or at least pardoned, for their actions.

But was it a necessary sacrifice that these SS men made for their adopted country, and for their fellow soldiers? Because if they didn't punish the Italians' terrorism, then more of their comrades would surely be targeted, the argument must have gone.

Whether it was necessary or not, all 335 of the Italian men and boys died in the caves. Most of them went to their deaths quietly – kneeling obediently, and remaining still while guns were pressed to the backs of their heads.

Historians Robert and Marilyn Aitken describe the scene viscerally:

The massacre began in an orderly fashion, but it quickly unraveled. Some victims did not die after one shot. Some had to climb on top of dead bodies because with so many corpses there was not sufficient room on the ground. Others were decapitated by the bullets. Some Germans were incapable of firing their weapons. The cave became Dantesque, seething with gun smoke, vomit, excrement, blood, and the scattered remains of bones, brains, and facial and body tissue. There was a constant and continual roar from the shooting. There were cries and screams from those who would not go quietly. Cognac flowed freely for those Germans who were repulsed by the carnage. One German, 2nd Lieutenant Gunther Amonn, refused to shoot.

The Italians being brought into the caves at gunpoint must have been in shock. How could what they were seeing around them be real?

I didn't have a gun to my head, but I was frozen, staring in disbelief as Dario locked the door with his key and took out a plastic tarp which he spread out on the loveseat. Ugo, for his part, put down the amphora, stepped over to me, and began binding my hands with twine.

I was sheep-like. And I allowed my cowardice to continue – I even excused it because Ugo had put his mouth to my ear while he was tying me, saying with wine-smelling words, "If you make trouble, it'll go much, much harder on you."

I've heard, since then, that in situations like attempted kidnapping, you should resist, even if you're threatened with a deadly weapon. Because if the person is prepared to use that

weapon, they're likely to kill you even if you do what they say; and if they're unsure whether or not they can carry out the threat, you'll have a shot at getting away.

This may be true; I can't say for sure – I imagine it depends on the situation. But if I had it back, I would scream, and I would fight. I fantasize that I would, anyway, but at the time, I didn't see that as an option. I was blind to that, or was too scared to open my eyes.

Ugo sat me down on the plastic-covered loveseat and tied my feet together, while Dario brought over a pitcher of wine and leaned over, putting it to my lips.

"Dario, please," I said, turning my head.

He stood up straight and nodded toward the bag he'd brought in. "I have a funnel in there," he said. "Do I have to use it?"

"Can we just – please can we just please talk about this?"

He shoved the pitcher toward my face. "Drink it. The whole thing. And while I'm refilling it, you can talk."

So I drank, and I did it as quickly as I could, but he was pouring it fast, dumping the Sangiovese down my throat until I gagged and choked and felt like I was drowning in it. And when it was empty, as I coughed and spat, he walked briskly over to the amphora and started ladling more wine into the pitcher.

"Wait," I sputtered, and as I said it, I saw that Ugo was holding the lute that one of the actors had been strumming in the living room earlier. He was unstringing it.

"Wait, please – " I said, but Dario was there again, pulling my head back, pouring more wine into my nose and mouth as I coughed. He said, "*Hai fatto la spia*" – that I'd snitched. "So," he said, emptying the pitcher on my face, "now you can put this in your big fucking mouth."

Then he smacked me on the side of the head, and as my ear was ringing, I saw Ugo kneeling in front of me, lifting up my toga. He grabbed my boxers – he was tearing them – but Dario, at least, had gone back to the amphora to fill the pitcher again. He said, "You know fucking well that Jove always punishes liars and traitors. Or don't you teach that in your classes, *professore*?"

"You're the fucking liar," I said weakly, before going into a coughing fit.

Then he was standing over me again with another full pitcher, reaching his hand down toward my chin.

"You promised," I said. "You promised you'd let me talk!"

"Then talk," he said with disgust. "Push more shit out of that asshole you call a mouth. Then I'll wash it out for you again."

I cried out suddenly and squirmed, because Ugo had grabbed hold of my penis, and was winding the lute string around it.

"We don't know!" I said. "How do we know Tiberius didn't put some padding or something to protect the guy's penis? How do we know how long he kept the string on? You can't just assume – we have to read the text. We have to read the text!"

Ugo looked up at Dario, and the two argued while I sat there. They finally decided they would read the passage in Suetonius' *The Lives of the Caesars* that described the torture.

Dario sat down at the desk and opened my laptop. He typed for a few moments, then he read aloud:

In Caprae, Tiberius used to watch from the cliff top as his victims were thrown into the sea after prolonged and exquisite tortures. A party of marines were stationed below, and when the bodies came hurtling down they wacked at them with oars and boat-hooks –

He stopped reading and frowned at the computer.

"Keep reading," I said, even though I wasn't sure, because I hadn't read Suetonius in years. "Keep reading – please – you're almost there," I said.

"*Si, si*," he said. "Here it is." He read:

An ingenious torture of Tiberius' devising was to trick men into drinking an amphora each of wine, and then suddenly to knot a cord tightly round their genitals, which not only cut into the flesh but prevented them from urinating.

Dario looked up from the computer. "That's it, *cazzo*. The text is clear."

"But – " I said, "Whose translation is that?"

"Robert Graves," Dario said. OK, I thought, he'd been reading an Italian translation of Robert Graves' work.

"Robert Graves embellishes the shit out of everything!" I said, "You know that. Try Thompson. He's boring, but he never puts in any extra details. Try Alexander Thomson."

Dario shook his head. "This is bullshit."

"Please, Dario. If you do this, I'll, I'll – "

He turned to face me. "You'll accept your fate with grace? No more spitting or squirming?"

I didn't know what else to do. So I said, "Yes, I'll accept my fate. Now look up Thompson."

He started typing on the computer. When he'd found the Thomson translation, he read:

Among various kinds of torture invented by Tiberius, one was to induce people to drink an amphora of wine, and then to tie up their members with lute-strings, thus tormenting them at once by the tightness of the ligature, and the stoppage of the urine.

"There, you see!" I said. "There's no cutting into flesh, like Robert Graves says. Graves just *assumed* the flesh was cut into, but Suetonius never actually said that. What if this was Tiberius' party torture, and it wasn't meant to be all that serious, so he had the torturer put some padding under the string so there wouldn't be any permanent damage?"

But Dario wasn't listening. He was typing.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"We must see it in Latin," he said.

Then he started reading the original version, in Suetonius' words, written 1,900 years ago:

Excogetauerat autem inter genera cruciatus etiam, ut singulis anphora meri potione per fallacium oneratos, repente ueretris deligatis, fidicularum simul urinaque tormento distenderet.

He picked up the laptop and walked back over to the couch. "This is not a party game," he said. Then he shoved the screen up close to my face. "You see now, finally? The words *cruciatus* and *tormento* are uncompromising."

My eyes flew across Suetonius' lines. "It doesn't say they died. It doesn't say how long they had the string on, or what happened to the guys who got tortured."

Dario shut the laptop. "The cord," he said, "was on long enough for the man to drink a whole amphora of wine."

"Okay," I said. "I'll drink the fucking amphora. But get me some vomit vases from downstairs. Because Suetonius doesn't ever say whether or not the men threw up. That's a gray area. It's open to interpretation. So I'm going to throw up as much as I can."

Dario shook his head. "We have to fulfill the oaths we made before Jove – especially on his sacred day."

"But –"

"You swore," he said, "to undergo the torture of Tiberius. What you're talking about isn't torture." He went back to the desk to get the pitcher of wine that he'd left there, nodding to Ugo as he passed him.

Ugo started winding the lute string around my penis again.

"Drinking seven gallons of wine and throwing it up when you can't even piss the whole time, which I have to do now, *is* torture!"

Dario said, "That's a bullshit loophole, and you're not gonna stick your *piccolo cazzo* through it. Ugo," he said, "tighten him up."

Ugo started tightening the cord around my penis.

"Ugo!" I said, "You'll still be fulfilling your oath if you put padding under that!"

I felt serious constriction, but I couldn't see what he was doing – I didn't know how bad it was. "The text," I said, "the text supports that interpretation! Please, we're brothers before Jove – we sacrificed together today. There's no justice in hurting your brother more than you have to!"

Ugo had started mumbling to himself and I said, "We could have tortured the lamb, killed him slow, but Jove didn't want that. He doesn't want this!"

Ugo leaned in toward me. "Shut the fuck up and drink your wine."

Then he looked at Dario and shrugged. "But if he wants to puke, let him puke. It's tradition."

Chapter 14

Three days later I was back at Larissa's, packing for my flight the next morning to California. I was going to lose tenure, which meant I'd be fired, but they had to give me a year's notice. I could have asked them to find an adjunct to cover my classes – I think they would have preferred that in order to avoid the awkwardness of seeing me around – but I decided I wanted to be there. I like teaching; I like the University, and I was looking forward to hanging out with students and with Duncan again. Elisabetta, too, said she wanted to come and visit. We planned to take surfing lessons together in the fall.

When I was done with the worst of the packing, I went into the kitchen for a glass of wine – a cool, soothing white wine out of the fridge. I wasn't sure, at that point, how long it would take until I'd be able to drink a red wine again – especially a Sangiovese.

Larissa came in while I was drinking the wine, which I was doing slowly, cringing slightly each time I swallowed.

She looked at me sympathetically and said, "How's all the soreness? Do you feel any better?" She'd been sweet like that to me the whole day, ever since her friend had told her that three sculpted amphorae had magically appeared at the Culture Ministry, along with a bottle of lube and a graphic message saying where the Minister and his museum curators could install them.

I cleared my throat gingerly. "I'm a little better," I said hoarsely.

“Good,” she said. “Do you have any requests for your last meal here? Or do you want soup again?”

“God, no,” I said, limping slightly over to the kitchen table. “How about cacio e pepe? With just a little pepe.”

She liked the idea, and brought Zara down out of her room to help us cook.

A few minutes later, while we were grating cheese and listening to Zara’s horrible Italian music, I started thinking about James, and I had the feeling that Zara was, too.

When the pasta was almost ready, I said, “Maybe we should pack this up and go have a picnic.”

“I don’t know,” Larissa said. “It’s getting late.”

“Come on, Mom,” Zara said. “It won’t be dark for like two hours. We should go to, I don’t know, Villa Pamphili or something.”

“Actually,” I said, “I was thinking we might walk down to Cestius’ pyramid, and, we could stop by the cemetery while we’re there. I haven’t had a chance to see the place where James is buried.”

They both stared at me. They were equally hard to read.

I suddenly felt terrible. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to –”

“I’ll go,” Zara said quietly.

“It’s OK,” I said. “We don’t have to go. I really shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Stop,” Zara said. “Don’t make such a big deal out of it. But I don’t get why you want to – I mean, it’s kinda weird to have a picnic on someone’s grave.”

“It is now,” I said. “But it used to be a normal way to spend an evening.”

I wasn't making that up. The ancients used to go to where their loved ones were buried, and have a little party. They would sing songs and recite poems, and they'd pass around the dead person's favorite food and wine.

Most Romans, up through the High Empire, anyway, were cremated after they died, and their ashes were put into urns. The urns were buried, but they had openings in their lids which pipes were stuck into, and those pipes poked up out of the ground. So, when family and friends were eating and drinking at a grave, they'd pause every so often to pour a little wine into the pipe, and let it gurgle down into the urn and mix with the ashes of their loved one.

Even though we weren't able to do exactly that at James' grave, we poured wine on the weedy grass and wildflowers growing on the slope where he's buried. We also laid bites of cacio e pepe there, along with a taste of the Scotch I bought.

When the sun began to go down, we decided to leave. As we neared the crumbling walls surrounding the cemetery, we passed Shelley's grave. I'd known he was buried there, but I didn't know he'd written about the cemetery the year before he himself was buried there. But Zara knew. She said that Shelley came there during the last year of his life to mourn his friend and fellow poet John Keats, who had just been buried. After that visit, Shelley wrote:

Go thou to Rome – at once the Paradise,

The grave, the city, and the wilderness;

And where its wrecks like shatter'd mountains rise,

And flowering weeds, and fragrant copses dress

The bones of Desolation's nakedness

Pass, till the spirit of the spot shall lead

Thy footsteps to a slope of green access

Where, like an infant's smile, over the dead

A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread;

And gray walls moulder round, on which dull Time

Feeds, like slow fire upon a hoary brand;

And one keen pyramid with wedge sublime,

Pavilioning the dust of him who plann'd

This refuge for his memory, doth stand

Like flame transform'd to marble; and beneath,

A field is spread, on which a new band

Have pitch'd in Heaven's smile their camp of death,

Welcoming him we lost with scarce extinguish'd breath.

Here pause: these graves are all too young as yet

To have outgrown the sorrow which consign'd

It's charge to each; and if the seal is set,

Here, on one fountain of a mourning mind,

Break it not thou! too surely shalt thou find

Thine own well full, if thou returnest home,

Of tears and gall. From the world's bitter wind

Seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb.

What Adonais is, why fear we to become?

The One remains, the many change and pass;

Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;

Life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass,

Stains the white radiance of Eternity,

Until death tramples it to fragments. – Die,

If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!

Follow where all is fled! – Rome's azure sky,

Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak

The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak.

Vita

The author lives in Santa Barbara.