

# THE DOGS OF ROME

AN ALEC BLUME NOVEL

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B L O O M S B U R Y  
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## 1

FRIDAY, AUGUST 27, 10:30 A.M.

ARTURO CLEMENTE PUT down the phone, turned to the woman lying among the twisted sheets and said, “That was Sveva. You need to go right now.”

“Now?” The woman pouted and started pulling her clothes off the floor.

She stood in front of the open window and linked her hands behind her neck, which raised her heavy breasts a little and made Arturo nervous that she could be seen.

“God, it’s hot,” she said, turning her broad shoulders to catch the slight breeze. The window looked straight into the lower canopy of an umbrella pine that was almost as high as the apartment building. The outside shutters were half-closed, too, so there was not too much danger the people in the apartments opposite would see her.

Thanks to the tree and the small garden in which it stood, the usual Roman smells of dust, car fumes, and rubbish were overlaid with a heavy perfume of pine resin. Even the sounds of the streets seemed to be muted from here. It was a private place, more conducive to sleep than to sex. She seemed to be moving in luxurious slow motion.

“You need to go right now,” said Arturo. “She’s changed her plans. She’s on her way back with Tommaso. It must be a vote or something.”

He went to the window and peered out, just to make sure no one was looking. He could see the exoskeletons of re-hatched cicadas still clinging to the patch of pine bark outside.

Manuela worked her way methodically into a pair of tight white jeans with jewelled pockets, and struggled a bit with the zip. “Don’t break my balls. So much for our weekend.”

It had been Manuela’s idea to spend the weekend together in Arturo’s house while Sveva was in her constituency center in Padua. He had not been so sure it was a good idea, and now he was being proved right.

Manuela was soon ready to go. Arturo, dressed only in boxer shorts, pulling in his stomach a bit, but not much since there was no point, accompanied her to the door.

In her shoes, she was taller than he was. Just before she left, she laid a hand on his arm, squeezed it hard, and brought her face close enough for him to see the pinched skin over her lip.

“Arturo,” she said, “we could be good together. I know we could. But not like this.” She waved a large hand to indicate the bedroom, the apartment, him, Rome, everything. “You have young child. I respect that. But just don’t . . .” She paused. “I am really keen for it to work.”

Arturo closed the door behind her and strolled back to the bedroom. He felt relief and no hurry. Sveva said she was calling from Padua. Even if the train left right now, she would still take a whole five hours. He stripped the sheets off the bed and then wondered what to do with them. He put them in the dirty laundry basket, and took out others that seemed more or less the same. He did not see how Sveva would notice the difference. Neither he nor she did the laundry.

And even if she did. He no longer cared to hide his loneliness. When Sveva came to Rome, it was to vote in the Senate against Berlusconi, not to spend time with her husband.

It had been a while since he had made a bed. Removing the creased sheets had already tired him. He set the folded fresh linen on the mattress, then abandoned the enterprise and went for a shower. He stayed in it for a long time, feeling guilty about all the water he was using, to escape the heat and wash off the lingering tastes and smells of Manuela.

As he turned off the water, the tree’s first adult cicada struck up with a rattling of its tymbals just loud enough to drown out the rasping sound of someone downstairs buzzing the intercom.

Within seconds of stepping out of the shower, Arturo could already feel the first traces of sweat gathering in the lines of his brow. Then the invisible cicada stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and the silence was beautiful. He listened to the droplets of water from his body hit the marble floor.

He squinted at the wardrobe mirror, and saw the blurred outline of a naked man whose flesh was expanding and drooping despite conscientious vegetarianism. Three years ago, he had noticed tufts of hair in his ears. Now he noticed, or admitted the existence of, a dangling piece of lobe

above his Adam's apple, like those bits on turkeys, whatever they were called. Wattles.

A muffled thump came from the landing outside the apartment as if someone had dropped something soft and heavy. The cicada outside crawled a few centimeters up the cracked bark, tried a few experimental clicks before striking up again and rapidly increasing the frequency to a level that seemed unsustainable.

Then the doorbell rang.

Arturo glanced around and picked his bathrobe off the towel rack, revealing Tommaso's comically small one underneath. Arturo pictured his son's round head with its exuberant blond curls all wrapped up inside the hood of his bathrobe, his grave eyes looking out. The child's voice was permanently pitched to a tone of perfect astonishment at all the interesting things he saw around him. Nursery school had been a shock. All those hours away from his familiar surroundings.

Not that Sveva had ever figured much in them. She seemed to regard Tommaso as a strategic mistake. He had arrived late, well into the time of life when most estranged aging couples prefer a pair of high-maintenance dogs to human offspring. But it was a mistake Arturo was glad they had made. Now Tommaso and Sveva were beginning to spend time together. Bringing him to Padua had been a first, the mother maybe beginning to make it up to her child for the empty early years, warming to him at last, proud of how he had turned out; she had needed to wait until Tommaso could speak and reason before showing affection. Sveva was not one to coo.

The doorbell rang again, and Arturo could not locate his glasses.

"I am not answering that," he muttered aloud to himself, pulling on the bathrobe. The front door to the building was no barrier to vendors. Someone always buzzed them in. Once, in vengeful fun, he kept a heavyset Kirby vacuum cleaner saleswoman in the apartment for two hours demonstrating her clunky useless product before telling her to fuck off.

He heard a scratching outside the front door, followed by four hard thumps.

Ringling the bell was intrusion enough, but banging at his door was an affront. Arturo tightened the cord on his robe and strode down the corridor, a torrent of abuse already running through his head. Angrily, majestically, he flung open the reinforced door and found himself looking at a

sagging cardboard box of groceries and two plastic packs of Nepi mineral water.

A smallish man dressed in a white Adidas jogging suit zipped up to the collar, who must have been hugging the wall on the left, slipped into his vision. Arturo peered at him. The man peered back. He seemed to have a light moustache, but it may have been just the slanted light.

“Arturo Clemente?” said the man, cocking his head to one side. He waved a small bony hand at the box and bottles on the floor.

Arturo had completely forgotten about the delivery of the groceries that he himself had bought last night, and his anger subsided. He stood back and held the door open.

The delivery boy slid the box across the threshold, hissing through his teeth from the effort. He used his foot to get the two packs of mineral water inside. He kicked one too hard and it toppled over as it crossed the slight ledge between the outside landing and the apartment floor.

He wasn't the usual delivery boy. He was not really a boy at all, now that he was standing so close. His hair was wispy and light, like a two-year-old's, but was thinning in the middle. He was wearing slip-on shoes under shimmering Adidas tracksuit bottoms that had zips running down the calves. Arturo felt a quick flash of pity. Here was a man trying to fit in with the ugly prole look of his younger colleagues.

Arturo realized that he'd have to go back to his bedroom for his wallet if he wanted to tip the man, who was breathing fast with little grunts. Maybe he should offer a glass of water. The man gave him a crooked-toothed smile and darted his tongue over his slightly pouting lips. Maybe not.

Arturo walked quickly down the hallway, glancing at the shelves on his left on the off-chance he had left a few coins lying about that he could use, but found none. As he reached the bedroom, from behind he heard the familiar soft clunk of the front door closing. He glanced back briefly and saw the white shape of the man squeezed up against the wall at the end of the corridor.

As he entered the bedroom, Arturo felt a twinge of uneasiness, as if someone had tugged on a thin cord attached to the inside of his navel. The usual delivery boy slid the boxes over the threshold, stepped outside immediately and left. This one looked like he wanted to go nosing his way through the house, poking his pointed face into nooks and crannies. A second cicada struck up.

Moving quickly, he retrieved his trousers, which were draped over a chair, and fumbled about for his wallet. He decided not to waste time looking for coins or his glasses, and strode out of the bedroom, wallet in hand. The man seemed to have assumed a crouching posture, but had not moved an inch from where he had been before, the box of groceries and plastic mineral water packs slightly to his left.

Arturo nodded curtly and slowed his pace as he moved up the corridor checking the contents of his wallet. Now he remembered he had dumped all the spare change into a Deruta bowl that sat on one of the shelves in his study. All he had was notes, and the smallest was a twenty. He could not tip twenty. Nor would he veer off into the study, leaving his visitor to sniff about.

“Look, I’m sorry about this . . . ,” he began. His voice was louder than he had intended, his tone more pompous.

The deliveryman suddenly held up a hand to cut him off in midsentence. Arturo was so taken aback that he stopped speaking at once. Then, realizing that he had just done the stranger’s bidding, he opened his mouth again to protest. The man took a step forward. He did have a light moustache. He pointed meaningfully to the closed front door, as if he and Arturo were in on some significant quest together. Arturo obeyed again, and paused to listen.

Beautiful Claudia Sebastiano on the floor above was playing a Mozart piano sonata, adagio, holding her own against the cicadas’ prestissimo clacking. Someone sneezed twice with an exaggerated whoop. The brass jingle preceding the RAI television news rang out from an open window somewhere, but it was late August and the city was mostly quiet.

“What is it?” Arturo’s voice betrayed anxiety.

“I thought I heard someone outside the door just now . . . let me see.” The voice was slightly nasal and complaining, like a Milanese woman’s. He peered into the spy hole in the door. Arturo spotted his glasses on a shelf to his right, grabbed them and put them on his face. The deliveryman snapped his head away from the spy hole and twisted round to catch what Arturo was doing. He scanned the shelf, Arturo’s hands, and then his face. Then his quick eyes registered the glasses perched slightly askew on Arturo’s fat nose, and he smiled and jerked his head, as if agreeing that the glasses were a good idea.

Arturo resolved to control the situation. He checked a massive desire to

hurl himself at the intruder and trample him to death. The important thing now was to make sure his voice did not quaver. He knew his face must be white by now. His bathrobe had opened, but closing it would seem womanly. Everything depended on tone.

“Thank you for the groceries. I am afraid I can’t find a tip. I want you to leave now.”

His voice had hardly cracked. Perhaps some anger had seeped through, but that was all the better.

The visitor shifted back from the door and cocked his head slightly to study him. From downstairs, Arturo heard the dilapidated door to the apartment block slam. Was that someone going or arriving? The deliveryman’s slow wink was followed by an almost imperceptible upward tilt of the face.

Arturo’s mind raced back over the years. An old friend. An old enemy. A debt of some sort. He had never had debts. A more recent encounter, then. Manuela? Surely not. He couldn’t work it out. A joke. They were filming this? He wasn’t famous enough yet.

Not a joke. A theft. This was a house invasion by a robber. Incredible, but obvious, too.

The man was smaller than he was. It looked like a safe bet.

Arturo Clemente’s physical instincts drove him into action before his mind worked its way around to a full decision. He lunged forward, concentrating all his ninety-five kilos of weight into a single fist that aimed to burst the insulting lips. But with a squeal that was either delight or fear, the deliveryman twisted and lashed out at the side of Arturo’s head, knocking his glasses flying. Arturo only just managed to land a glancing blow to the bony shoulder.

“You have a violent streak!” His tone was pleased, as if Arturo had just done something immensely clever. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for . . . ?” Arturo broke off. He was not going to be distracted by words.

The intruder shrugged then brought his right hand over to rub his left shoulder where Arturo had hit him. Then he unzipped, reziped his jacket. A flash of something caught Arturo’s eye, and he tried to bring the arm that had just hit him in the face into focus. It had not seemed like an impressive arm. It reminded him of a chicken bone. The hand at the end seemed small and pink.

They resumed their positions as if it were an arranged duel. Arturo

retreated down the corridor to defend his home. He refastened his bathrobe. His bare feet were clammy on the floor and now he was worried he would slip.

Arturo had done some street fighting against the neo-fascists and the police back in the late seventies. His opponent, now a blur at the other end of the corridor, had got lucky. A real fighter would have followed up on his punch and not allowed Arturo to reposition himself. This time, he would pummel, then strangle and maybe choke the identity out of his attacker. Arturo growled, balled his fists, and lunged down his hall again like a slow old bull.

The blow he received in the stomach wiped every thought from his mind except for a sickening concept of yellowness. He found himself standing in the middle of the corridor, unable to raise his arms. Even lifting his chin off his chest now seemed very difficult. With great effort, breathing heavily through his nose, Arturo edged his hands around his stomach, and folded them there, like Sveva had done when pregnant with Tommaso.

His hands were cold, and the outflow from his stomach felt like hot diarrhea. Except it was blood. He could see that now, just as he could see the knife in the hand with a silver bracelet, tracing an arc in the air. Without warning, Arturo's right leg gave way, and he found himself half kneeling. It turned out to be a good move, because the deliveryman's jab toward his throat failed, and the knife tip punctured only the air. But the clumsy backhanded thrust that immediately followed, which should have missed him altogether, went straight in under the left collarbone. The attacker then pushed downward with the tempered metal, and transfixed him. Then, for reasons Arturo could only dimly grasp at, he pulled it out again. Arturo raised his infinitely heavy hands upward to fend off the next blow, but he couldn't see anything now. So he decided he should talk. If he could get the words out, the deliveryman might stop in time. Something thudded against his chest, and he felt the floor, solid, straight against his back. A froth rising in his throat so softened the words as he spoke them that they came out as gurgles. He tried to swallow down the froth but it rose and rose like overboiling milk. Arturo jerked his legs like a baby on a changing mat. The pain signals from each wound were all traveling inward now, all converging on one tiny bright point in the very middle of his body. He didn't want to be there when they merged. He sent the darkness behind his eyes racing down his body, hoping it would get there first.