

# LUPERCALIA

Bobby and Lianne Dexter were good people. They owned a brand new timber mansion on an acre plot cut into a vast green swathe of pines thirty miles outside Seattle. They put in long hours for Microsoft down the road, Bobby in marketing, Lianne in finance. They hiked every weekend and, once a year, made it to the summit of Mount Rainier. They worked out too, though Bobby still couldn't keep what he called the 'family tummy-pudge' coming through over the belt of his jeans. And that at just thirty-three.

The Dexters were quiet, comfortably wealthy middle-class Americans. Except for two weeks a year, in spring, when they went abroad on vacation. They'd reasoned this through. It was all a question of balance. Work hard for fifty weeks of the year. Party hard for the remaining two. Preferably somewhere the locals didn't know you, where different rules applied. Or maybe didn't apply at all. Which was why, on a chill February day, they were ten miles outside Rome, dead drunk on red wine and grappa, seated in a hired Renault Clio which Bobby was driving much too fast over the potholes of an unmarked

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lane that ran from a back road behind Fiumicino airport down towards the flat, grey line of the meandering Tiber.

Lianne glanced at her husband, making sure he didn't see the anxiety in her face. Bobby was still fuming. He'd had the metal detector out all morning, hunting around the outskirts of Ostia Antica, the excavated remains of imperial Rome's one-time coastal harbour. Just when he got a couple of beeps out of the thing a pair of fierce-looking archaeology types came out of the site and began screaming at them. Neither of them understood Italian but they got the drift. Either they packed up the metal detector and got out of there pronto or the Dexter annual vacation was likely to end in fisticuffs with a couple of punchy-looking spic students who were only too ready and eager for action.

Bobby and Lianne had retired hurt to a nearby roadside *osteria* where, to add insult to injury, the waiter, an unshaven lout in a grubby sweatshirt, had lectured both on how wrong it was to pronounce the word 'pasta' as 'pahstah', the American way.

Bobby had listened, his white, loose cheeks reddening with fury, then snapped, 'Just gimme a fucking steak then.' And added a litre of *rosso della casa* to the order just for good measure. Lianne said nothing. She knew when it was smart to acquiesce to Bobby's mood. If things got too bad drinkwise they could always dump the car at the airport and take a cab back into town. Not that Italians minded about drunk driving. They did it all the time, it seemed to her. Or at least she assumed they did. Italy was like that. Lax. She and Bobby were just behaving like the locals.

'I cannot believe these people,' Bobby complained as he rolled the Clio over a pile of dried mud that had

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caked neatly into a solid ridge after the recent winter rain. ‘I mean like . . . don’t they have enough of this fucking stuff as it is?’

Lianne knew what the problem was. The previous autumn the Jorgensens had returned from vacation in Greece with a gorgeous marble bust the size of a soccer ball. It was of a young man, maybe Alexander the Great they said, with a full head of hair and a pretty, slightly feminine face. They kept it quiet at first, just to get the effect right. Then, out of the blue, Tom Jorgensen had invited them over to their extended Scandinavian-style cabin just down the lane – which had three storeys, mind, and a good acre and a half out back – on the pretext of a social drink. Really it was all about the marble head. Jorgensen let it be known he’d ‘found’ it by hanging around the edge of some archaeological excavation outside Sparta, waiting till the diggers had gone home and then bribing one of the locals to take him to where the mother lode lay. Tom had talked a good deal about how he smuggled it out of the country as excess baggage. It was all, Lianne suspected, one of Tom’s stories. Really he’d just bought it at the store like everyone else. The big, muscular bastard was always spinning a line about something or other. It was why he’d jumped over Bobby’s head to get into all the sexy music and TV stuff the company was doing now, meeting rock stars and movie people while Bobby, who was just as bright, maybe brighter even, was still lumbered with the tedious geeks who came over horny about databases.

But Tom’s little act had struck home. Two weeks later Bobby announced that their annual vacation the coming spring would be in Italy. He hadn’t even asked her opinion. Lianne was quietly hoping for Aruba. All the

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same, she demurred. It was the best thing to do, and, as it turned out, Rome hadn't been a bad choice. In fact, she was starting to like the place. Then, that morning, it had all turned worse. Some creepy British academic type had given them a history lecture over buffet break-fast in the hotel. About how this was the day of the dead for the ancient Romans, a day when they would sacrifice a goat or a dog and wipe its blood on the foreheads of their kids, just to make sure they remembered their ancestors. The history link pushed Bobby's buttons. Fifteen minutes later he was tracking down a hire company, renting the metal detector.

So now they were in the middle of nowhere, dead drunk, clueless about what to do next. Lianne pined for Aruba and the pain was all the worse because she'd no idea what the place was like. Without letting Bobby see she put a hand on the steering wheel and turned the lurching Clio just far enough away from a boulder coming up at them from the right. The track was getting narrower all the time. There were still mud holes here and there from some recent rain. Maybe they'd get the car stuck and have to walk back to the road for help. She didn't like that idea. She hadn't brought the shoes.

'It's just pure greed, Bobby,' she said. 'What else can you say?'

'I mean . . . what does it matter? If I don't find the shit it stays right there in any case! It's not like you see any fucking Italians digging the crap out of the ground.'

He was wrong there. She'd seen digs all over the place, half of them looking abandoned, maybe because they just didn't have the bodies to do all that digging. All the same it was best to go along with his gut feeling.

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‘They don’t need it, Bobby. They got more than they can cope with already. They got it coming out their ears.’

They had too. Her mind was still reeling from all the museums they’d visited these past two days. There was so much *stuff*. And unlike Bobby, she’d read the guide-books. She knew they’d only scratched the surface. The pair of them were spending an entire *week* in Rome and would still come away without seeing everything. It seemed excessive. Bad planning. Poor taste. Bobby was right. If they had any manners they’d share it around a little.

The car headed down into a crater, leapt out the other side, briefly became airborne then slammed onto the ground with a bang. It sounded to her as if something had come loose underneath. She scanned the view ahead. Beyond the funny-looking grass, which seemed more like the kind of plants you got in marshland or bogs than on the beach she was expecting, lay a grey, scummy ribbon of water. The road came to a dead end a little way short of the low bank. Bobby had to get out here, have his fun – or otherwise – and then they needed to take the car back to Avis and scuttle off into the city before anyone noticed the dents and worse she felt sure would be there.

‘Don’t you worry,’ she said. ‘You’re going to find something here, Bobby. I just know it. You’re going to find something and when you do that asshole Tom Jorgensen is going to be as jealous as hell. You—’

He kicked down hard on the brakes, bringing the little car to a sudden halt twenty yards short of the end of the lane. Her husband was now staring into her face with that cold, hard expression she only saw once or twice a year, and hated, more than anything, hated so

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much that sometimes she wondered whether marrying Bobby Dexter, tubby Bobby, the one all the other girls laughed at behind his back, had really been such a good idea at all.

‘What?’ Bobby asked in a flat, dead tone that was supposed to be full of meaning.

‘I only, only, only—’ She stuttered into silence.

He prodded her chest with a stubby finger. She could smell the booze on his breath.

‘You really think this is all about Tom Fucking Jorgensen?’

‘No!’

‘You really think I have researched, booked, paid for this entire fucking vacation, taken you to all these beautiful places, brought you out here to this stinking backwater . . . all because of Tom Fucking Jorgensen and his shitty piece of marble?’

She paused before answering. In three years of marriage Bobby had reduced her to tears only once and that was in Cancun over a sexual demand she regarded as irrational, unnecessary and intrinsically unhygienic. The memory still smarted. She didn’t understand why it wouldn’t go away.

‘I didn’t. It just seemed. I don’t know—’ All the wrong words tumbled out of her mouth.

‘Jesus!’ Bobby roared. ‘Jesus Christ!’

He gunned the accelerator, rammed the Clio into first and let go of the clutch. The little car lurched bravely forward with a gut-wrenching start, veered to one side and impaled itself on a small dried mud mountain which appeared, to Lianne anyway, to contain the stump of a fence post at its heart. They were now pitched up at an awkward, sickening angle. The front right wheel

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screamed impotently as the mud mountain levered the entire right front end of the Clio into thin air.

Bobby stared at Lianne accusingly. 'Fucking wonderful,' he grunted. 'Oh so fucking wonderful.'

She was crying, trying to choke back the sobs.

'Don't do this to me, Lianne. Not today. You're not in Cancun now. You can't go phone that animal you call a father and get him to come round and threaten to beat my brains to a pulp just 'cos you got a headache or something.'

Telling her old man had been a mistake. She knew that all along. But Bobby had asked for it. He crossed the line in Cancun. She needed to let him know.

'Bobby—' she blubbed.

He stared out of the window at the grey river and the sluggish movement of scum on its surface.

'Yeah?'

'I can smell gas,' she said, suddenly serious, the tears drying almost instantly under the rising presence of fear. 'Can't you?'

'Jesus,' he gasped and punched at her seat belt then stabbed open the passenger door. She smiled at him, glassy-eyed. He'd done it for her. Before he unfastened his own belt.

'Bobby—'

He pushed her out of the door. 'Get out for chrissake. Dumb stupid bitch—'

Bobby Dexter took one last look to make sure she was safe then turned round, flung a few things from the back seat out onto the ground and rolled out of the crazily skewed car himself. He was so drunk he did a quick one eighty and wound up on the cold, hard earth



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banging his elbows painfully. Bobby got in a good chunk of swearing about that.

He pushed himself upright with a weary hand, picked up his things, then checked she'd got herself well distant from the smell of gas. Lianne watched from the side of the road, a good ten yards from the dying Clio, her hands clasped behind her back looking like a schoolgirl waiting to be told what to do.

He walked over to join his wife.

'You OK?' he asked. He looked a little worried about how far this was going. That was something, she thought.

'Sure.' She'd stopped crying. He looked glad of that. It was something.

There was a sound from the car, a sort of breathy whoosh. They watched as a thin finger of flame flickered out from under the hood and worked its way up the windshield.

'Now that . . .' Bobby said, 'is what I like about rental vehicles. They can do this sort of shit in front of your eyes and you just get to stand back and enjoy the show. Wish I'd hired something bigger now.'

The low scuttering wind caught the flames, rolled them over the roof of the Clio, sent them swirling inside the window, eating up the seats where, just a minute or so before, Bobby and Lianne Dexter had sat arguing. Then, with a sudden roar and a puff of heat and smoke, the Renault was ablaze, devouring itself in a cloud of black smoke and flame.

Lianne clung to her husband's arm watching the spectacle. Bobby was right. This was Avis's problem. This was what they were for. Why they charged the kind of prices they did.

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‘What are we going to do now, Bobby?’ she wondered. Then she looked at him and found, to her relief, Bobby Dexter was smiling, happy once more, for the first time in hours.

He held up one of the things he’d taken from the back seat of the car. The metal detector they’d hired that very morning somewhere near the hotel in Rome.

‘What we came here for,’ Bobby Dexter said. ‘Daddy’s going a-hunting.’

She ventured a laugh and wondered if it came out wrong. Maybe it did. Maybe not. It didn’t matter anyway. Bobby Dexter wasn’t listening. He was working his way down to the river, walking over the odd, boggy ground that felt as if it might give way beneath them at any moment. He had the headphones on, listening. And pretty soon Bobby Dexter was laughing too. Something must have been coming through loud and clear. Lianne walked to join him. They were just twenty yards short of the river now. There wasn’t another soul around for miles. Anything they found here now was surely theirs.

‘Hear that?’

She took the headphones from him and held one earpiece to her head. It was beeping like crazy, like a kid’s game from years ago.

‘Fucking Tom Jorgensen,’ Bobby spat and she didn’t dare look into his eyes when he was talking like this. ‘I’ll teach that big fat bastard. Get me the gear.’

He was skulking in the little coffee bar around the corner from the Questura when Barbara Martelli walked in, dressed in her immaculate black uniform, helmet in

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hand, her long, blonde tresses bouncing above her collar with each step.

‘Nic,’ she said, looking surprised. ‘You’re back at work?’

‘First day,’ he replied, glancing at his watch. ‘When I decide to turn up.’

‘Ah.’

‘How are you, Barbara?’

‘I’m fine. I’m always fine. And you?’

He drained the macchiato. ‘Yeah.’

‘In case you forgot, this isn’t the café the cops use.’

‘So why are you here?’

She laughed. Barbara Martelli was about his height, with the kind of figure that turned every head in the station and a shock of blonde curls that seemed too full to squeeze inside that small black helmet. Her face was wrong for a cop. Too attractive, too ready to break into a smile. She looked as if she ought to be on the TV, announcing the weather or introducing some show. Instead she just floated around Rome on her big bike, handing out tickets with such charm the word was some people simply started speeding the moment they realized she was on their tail.

Back in the old days, before the shooting that put him on his back, fighting demons, Nic Costa wondered sometimes whether she was sweet on him. A couple of the guys egged him on to ask her for a date . . . provided he told everything afterwards. It didn’t happen. She was just too perfect. She topped every driving exam, behind the wheel and on the force motorbikes. She was a tidy shot too, a talent that got her into most diplomatic assignments. Barbara Martelli was just a little too perfect to touch.

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‘Sometimes you have to escape for a while, Nic. Is that what you’re doing? If so it’s a little early. You have to get back in the ring if you want to hear the bell.’

‘I’m having a coffee,’ he mumbled.

‘How long has it been?’

‘Six months.’ Six long months of slow recovery from the shooting and the mental damage that followed. Sometimes he wondered if he’d ever make it, whether he wanted to at all.

She looked at him frankly. She was, the more he thought about it, very possibly the most attractive woman inside the Questura. He was amazed he’d never asked her out. Not that he wanted anything to happen. She was just good company to be around, someone who could make you feel special. He didn’t really know her at all.

‘You do want to come back, don’t you? It’s not just Falcone pushing you into this?’

‘No. I mean. I can’t think of anything else. Can you?’

‘No.’

‘We’re all like that, aren’t we?’ he said. ‘Short of a choice.’

He listened to his own voice and found himself disliking what he heard. What was there? Resentment? Self-pity? He was twenty-eight. He’d never talked like that before. He had been changed by what was now known as ‘the Denney case’, an unresolved mess of entanglements that had cost his partner, Luca Rossi, his life, and almost left Costa dead too. This new Nic Costa no longer ran every time he wanted to clear his head, pounding the pavements around the Campo dei Fiori, arms flailing like a madman. He’d sold his tiny apartment in the Vicolo del Bologna and moved into his late father’s old

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home, the sprawling farmhouse off the Via Appia Antica where he grew up. Costa's physical wounds were, for the most part, healed; the internal ones still ached from time to time.

Nic Costa continued to miss Luca Rossi's taciturn wit and astute insight, wishing he'd learned to appreciate them more during their brief time working together. He knew, too, that he would return to work touched by the cold, sceptical hardness of the world. It had become necessary to embrace what Falcone, who had single-handedly talked him out of a wheelchair and back into the force, would call 'pragmatism'.

Falcone, the cold, single-minded inspector, regarded this transition as inevitable. Maybe he was right. Costa, who with his old self hated cynicism, the defeatism that said sometimes you had to make the best of a bad job because the alternative was to lose the fight completely, was still unsure. He didn't like the idea of trimming his principles to match the awkward, unyielding shape of brute reality. That much of his father – a stubborn, unbending Communist politician who made more enemies from his honesty than most men did through their deceit – remained.

Barbara Martelli downed the tiny coffee. She was thinking. She seemed briefly troubled, he thought, as if there was something she didn't want to say. 'I know what you mean.'

'You do?'

'About the choices.'

Something crossed her face then, some shadow of doubt, of unhappiness, and it struck him that Barbara Martelli's appearance wasn't always an advantage. It could be a burden too. This was how people judged her,

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on her looks, not the person beneath, who was somehow oddly remote.

‘But, Nic. The best thing is just to accept that’s how it is and get on with the job. Not . . .’ She looked at his coffee cup. It had been empty for a long time and they both knew it. ‘. . . not hide away in the corner somewhere. That’s not like you. At least, as much as I think I know you.’

He was late already. If she hadn’t walked in, he’d still be there, hesitating. And a moment would come, he knew it, when he’d turn round, go back to the farmhouse, maybe open a bottle of good wine, then undo everything he’d achieved these past few months, rebuilding his health, resurrecting what was left of his dignity and self-respect. There was a kind of glory in crashing out that way. If you could only prolong that feeling forever, it would be enough, would see you through an entire lifetime. The trouble was it didn’t last. You always woke up. The real world poked its head around the door and said, ‘Look.’ There was no escape and that was for the simplest of reasons: what he was running from lay inside.

‘Do I have to march you into that place or what?’ she asked.

‘I could call in sick.’

‘No!’ Her large, green eyes widened with anger.

They were flirting with each other. Not seriously, he realized. This was Barbara’s way of getting him moving. She’d use it on anyone she felt needed it.

‘This,’ she declared, ‘is what we do for a living. It’s our chosen vocation and there are no halfway houses. You’re either in. Or out. So which is it?’

A wild thought ran around his head then popped

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out of his mouth without even letting him consider the consequences. 'Do you think we'll ever go out on a date, Barbara? Do you think that's possible?'

A gentle blush rose in her cheeks. Barbara Martelli got asked out a dozen times a day.

'Ask me tomorrow,' she said. 'On one condition.'

He waited, still embarrassed by the sudden intimacy.

She pointed a long, manicured finger in the direction of the station. 'You ask me in there.'

They did everything wrong in Italy. The cappuccinos had insufficient milk. The pasta didn't taste right. The pizzas were too thin. And the booze. Lianne Dexter couldn't work out what was wrong. Ordinarily the effects would be wearing off by now, two hours after lunch. But she felt just as drunk as when they left the *osteria* and it was starting to make her edgy. She and Bobby had finished the single bottle of Pellegrino mineral water from the rucksack he'd snatched from the car before it went up in flames. Now they had nothing to drink, nothing to eat and not a lot of money either. She didn't even want to think about the walk back along the rutted lane towards the main road. How did you flag down an Italian and get him to take you to Avis for a refund on the crappy car they rented you? And what about the stuff Bobby had found? So far a coin, what looked like a very old, very big nail and something the size of a kid's hand, semi-circular, encrusted with crud, which Bobby assured her was definitely an ancient Roman neckband or the like and would come up great once he cleaned off the crap. Which was great except they weren't supposed to be hunting for these things. The Italians would surely

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know. And maybe the ‘necklace’ was just a brake lining anyway. Lianne’s father was a car mechanic. She knew about these things, a little anyway. It looked awfully like a brake lining to her.

She licked her lips. Her mouth was dreadfully dry. A cheap wine migraine was pumping at her temples. It was now approaching three in the afternoon and the light was fading. They needed to be moving. She didn’t want to be stranded all night in this odd wilderness, with its queer smell and the planes from Fiumicino screaming overhead every two minutes or less.

‘Bobby,’ she whined.

He wasn’t satisfied with the haul. Tom Jorgensen still had the marble head and it looked better than any of these things.

He tore off the headphones and barked, ‘What?’

‘Gonna get dark soon. We gotta go.’

He looked around at the grey sky and sniffed. ‘Five more minutes.’ Then he popped the headphones back on and wandered over towards the water’s edge. It was bog here. Lianne knew that instinctively. It had that odd, acid smell she associated with the cranberry farms in Maine, one of the places they’d trashed on an earlier vacation.

‘Peat,’ she said, suddenly remembering. Bobby mouthed ‘what the fuck now?’ at her with the headphones still clamped to his skull. A 747 careered over them so low she felt the earth shake. She had to put her hands over her ears just to try to keep out the bellowing of the plane’s engines.

‘Nothing,’ she whispered to herself in the plane’s wake, wishing she was somewhere else. Back home even. The cranberry farms had been nice. Interesting. Run by



people who spoke the same language she did and never made her feel out of place. Rome wasn't like that. She felt all the faces in the street were looking at her constantly, waiting for her to say the wrong thing, turn the wrong corner. It was all so *foreign*.

Then there was a new noise, an unexpected one. It was Bobby, whistling. He tore off the headphones and pointed to a patch of damp earth, covered in feeble grass, a few feet in front of him.

'One more thing, sweetheart. Then we're gone. Gimme the spade.'

She did as he asked. Bobby Dexter placed the shovel on the ground then jumped on it with both feet. The thing went straight in like a knife through hot butter. Bobby tumbled off the spade and hit the dirt once more.

'Peat,' she said again, watching Bobby writhe on the ground, cursing. 'It's soft, Bobby. You don't need to try so hard. Look—'

She picked up the trowel they'd brought and squatted down on the ground, next to where his spade had bitten the earth. Lianne had watched an archaeology programme on the Discovery Channel once. She knew how people did these things, though why they bothered, for six, maybe eight hours a day, was quite beyond her.

'You just do it gently,' she said and poked the end of the trowel into the soft earth. The acid reek came up and hit her in the face. It made her think of cranberries: all that sharp red juice mixed up with vodka. 'Look—'

She scraped the surface, trying not to breathe in the smell. And then the trowel stopped dead on something solid. Lianne Dexter gulped involuntarily and wondered whether her throat might seize up. She ran the trowel

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tentatively through the earth. It encountered the same solid object as far as she could push it.

Bobby lurched over the ground and took the trowel off her. He began working at the soil, a little too roughly she thought.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

An object was emerging. It was the colour of the peat, a dark, woody brown, and hard to the touch. Bobby scraped some more then the two of them took a deep breath and sat back. What lay before them, emerging gradually from the earth, appeared to be the carved representation of a human arm. A feminine one, probably, with the folds of a simple shift visible through the dirt, reproduced with an uncanny accuracy.

‘It looks real,’ Lianne said eventually.

‘Hello!’ Bobby bellowed sarcastically. ‘Earth to Planet Lianne. It’s a statue. It’s supposed to look real.’

‘Statues aren’t that colour.’

‘Lianne—’ He was getting exasperated again. His eyes had an angry roll to them. ‘This thing’s been sitting in the shit for a couple of thousand years or so. What colour do you expect it to come up? Shiny white or something? You think they shrink-wrapped it before putting it there?’

She didn’t answer. He had a point.

Bobby scraped some more. A hand emerged at the end of the arm: slender fingers clenched tightly shut around the shaft of something big. The two of them stood back for a moment and stared at the object in the mud. To Lianne the figure now looked very feminine and curiously familiar. Then her head lurched into gear and she realized what the connection was. This odd, dead thing in the ground resembled a cut-down version

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of the Statue of Liberty, trying to raise a big, stone torch, struggling to get it upright in the mud.

‘It’s not metal, Bobby,’ she said with a degree of boldness that worried her a little. ‘How come your machine picked it up? You thought of that?’

He glowered at her. ‘You amaze me sometimes. I’m sitting here maybe discovering Tutankhamun’s fucking tomb or something and all you can do is pick, pick, pick. Get off my back for a moment, will ya? I’m trying to think.’

He scraped down the other side, where the other arm might be. Sure enough it was there, only a few inches beneath the surface of the peat. Maybe the recent rain had washed away some of the crap that had been covering it. Bobby ran the trowel gently across the space in between the arms. The figure’s chest emerged. She was wearing what looked like a classical gown, with a V-neck that went low enough to disclose the rising curve of her slight and very lifelike breasts. The surface of the statue, when Bobby pushed away as much dirt as possible, was quite curious. It was the colour of old leather and a little shiny. For one brief moment, as he pushed and prodded with the trowel, Lianne thought it gave a little in places but that must have been the booze.

Bobby shuffled on his knees then pushed aside no more than four inches of soil a couple of feet below the areas he’d already exposed. He’d guessed well. There were the outlines of two ankles, some way apart, perfect, naked this time, no sign of a carved dress or anything.

‘It’s life-size, Bobby,’ Lianne said.

‘I know!’

‘So what are you going to do?’

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‘Jesus. If only I could see that fat fucker Jorgensen’s face right now. You bring the camera?’

She shook her head. ‘Forgot it.’

‘Typical. Thanks a million.’

‘Bobby!’

He looked at his wife. Lianne knew she was close to becoming downright argumentative just then. She didn’t care. Something bad was happening here and maybe it was time to take a stand.

‘What am I going to do?’ he asked. ‘What the fuck I like, Lianne. Whatever the fuck I like.’

‘It’s too big. You can’t pack that as excess baggage. Also it’s the colour of shit. And it smells. Can’t you smell it?’

‘It’s been in a bog for a million fucking years. You want it to come out smelling of roses?’

She pulled back from the thing and crossed her arms across her chest, mutinous. ‘I don’t want it smelling like that. And quit swearing at me all the time. It’s not nice.’

He cursed under his breath and went back up to the top end, where the head ought to be. Cautiously this time he brushed away at the soil there. She was hoping the head had gone. She was hoping all Bobby would find was the torso and a couple of legs sticking out of the bottom. And wouldn’t Tom Jorgensen see the funny side of that?

But there was a head. A beautiful one maybe once someone washed off all the crap. As Bobby Dexter scraped away, whistling again, his wife was beginning to put the pieces together, beginning to understand what they’d found. It was a life-size Roman statue, maybe a couple of thousand years old. Stained like shit from all this time in the peat, maybe, but perfect apart from that.

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She understood what Bobby would be thinking too. Who knew what they could do in a lab these days? Maybe get it right back to nice, white marble, like it had been when Julius Caesar or some other dead Italian first ordered it.

And there was the problem. It was just too big. The two of them couldn't even try and get it out of the ground. Five feet or so of stone was bound to weigh a ton. Even if they got someone in to help, there was no way they could ever bring the thing back to the USA.

'Let's just go, Bobby,' Lianne pleaded. 'We can call someone and tell them about it. Maybe they'd give us a reward. Maybe we'd be in the paper. You could stick that under Tom Jorgensen's nose and see how it felt.'

'Fucking reward,' he spat back at her. 'This is Italy, Lianne. They'd steal the thing for themselves and probably lock us up for messing around down here.'

'Then what are you going to do?'

She was defying him now and they both knew it. This was some kind of turning point in their marriage, one at which either life could go in one of two directions: to freedom or to servitude.

He got up and went for the spade, picked it up, felt the weight of the thing in his hands then stared avidly at the queer brown form half buried in the peat.

Lianne looked at him, a cold tangle of dread beginning to form in her stomach.

'Bobby?' she asked, half pleading. '*Bobby?*'

Nic Costa drove the unmarked police Fiat east along the city side of the main riverside drag. Gianni Peroni, the partner assigned to him that morning, was in the

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passenger seat filling his face with a panino leaking roast pork at the edges. He was a big, muscular man approaching fifty, with an unforgettable face. Somewhere along the line – and Costa just knew he was going to have to ask before long – Peroni's features had walked into a wall or something. His nose was crushed worse than any Costa had seen on a rugby player. His forehead sank low over a couple of bright, smart piggy eyes. A vicious scar ran diagonally across his right cheek. Just to complete the picture Peroni cut his grey hair as short as possible, a crew crop, like a US marine. In a neat dark suit and a crisp white shirt and tie, he looked like a thug dressed up for a wedding. It was station lore that the man had never once raised a fist to a customer in his career. He didn't need to, Costa thought. People took one look at him, gulped and came clean. It was one reason why Peroni was known far and wide as one of the most popular and respected inspectors in the force, the last man Nic Costa expected to be sharing his car with as an equal.

'I don't know how they dare call this *porchetta*?' Peroni grumbled. 'Where I come from . . . it's this little town near Siena. All farmers and stuff, too ordinary to get the tourists. Now there they do *porchetta*, every damn weekend. My uncle Fredo was a farmer. He showed me how. You'd kill the pig, you'd bone it. You'd take out the liver and soak it in grappa and stuff. Then you'd stay up all night roasting the thing. Fredo used to say that was the only night of the week he slept with a pig that didn't snore.'

Peroni watched him, waiting for a reaction. 'OK. Maybe you had to meet his missus to understand that one. Anyway *that* was *porchetta*. All hot and fresh and

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lots of crackling too. This shit's been sitting in the fridge for days. Want some?'

Costa eyed the pale dry meat. 'Not while I'm driving, thanks. Anyway, I don't eat meat.'

Peroni shrugged then wound down the window and ejected the greasy paper out into the rising temperature of a Roman spring morning. 'Oh yeah, I forgot. Your loss.'

Costa took his eyes off the busy riverside road for a second and looked at Peroni. 'That's littering. You don't do it from my car.'

'You mean, "That's littering, *Sir*?"'

'No,' Costa insisted. 'I mean what I said. You're just another cop. You heard Falcone.'

Peroni's oddly stiff face suddenly became animated. 'Equal rank, equal rank. How can Leo do this to me? Jesus, the stuff he's got away with and no one busts his ass. Leo and I are meant to be buddies, for God's sake. What does friendship mean in this world?'

Costa had made up his mind the moment he knew Peroni was his new partner. He wasn't taking any crap. He wasn't behaving like a subordinate. Maybe that was why Falcone fixed this in the first place. It was a lesson, perhaps a kind of punishment, for both of them.

Gianni Peroni's crime was now well known throughout the Questura, told and retold with a certain awe, a fable about how even the brightest and the best could fall from grace, and for such small temptations too. For years he'd worked his way up through the vice squad, with never a taint of corruption to his name. As inspector he'd busted three of the biggest hooker rings in the city and managed to stem the infiltration of the prostitute trade by the vicious Albanian crooks who'd started to

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muscle in on territories elsewhere. He never went out of his way to make friends. He never hid the fact that, at heart, he remained a working-class farm boy from Tuscany who didn't feel comfortable mixing with the upper strata of the force. All the same, Peroni's name had been marked out for big things. If he didn't look so weird and scary maybe they'd have happened by now too. Then he blew everything, one night some weeks before, an occasion that rapidly made its way into the hands of a gleeful press.

It was meant to be a sting operation organized by the Direzione Investigativa Anti-Mafia, the civilian force outside police control specifically aimed at halting mob activity. The DIA had set up a fake brothel in Testaccio, manned by real hookers brought in from Bologna. In three weeks it had run up enough clientele to attract the attention of the big-time pimps who would, the DIA knew, soon be round asking for either a cut or the heads of the men creaming off the profits.

Three heavies did turn up one Thursday night. When the DIA pounced they took in the brothel's customers, just out of interest, and went through their wallets before handing them on to the police as a free gift. Gianni Peroni had the misfortune to be in the room of a blonde Czech girl when they walked through the door. No amount of talking on his part was able to extricate him from the mess. Word got back to the Questura. Peroni was first suspended then sent crashing back to earth as a lowly plain clothes detective. And he was supposed to feel lucky. Had it been anyone else, an entire career would have disappeared down the drain.

Demotion and the loss of salary were the least of Peroni's concerns if Questura gossip was anything to go



by. He wasn't just admired for being a great cop. He was renowned throughout the building as a family man. His wife and his two teenage kids, one boy, one girl, were well known. Men and women on his squad dined regularly at the Peroni household. When they had problems, Peroni acted like a proxy father, offering advice, trying to keep them on track.

All that had been shattered on a chill January evening. Peroni didn't face prosecution. He'd broken no law. He'd just lost everything. His wife had gone back to Siena with both kids, demanding a swift divorce, shouting his betrayal from the rooftops. In a matter of weeks he'd gone from being an important cop, with a loving family, to a single, middle-aged man, alone, uncertain of his future career. And now Leo Falcone had put him in a car with Nic Costa, whose own position in the police appeared equally as uncertain and directionless. Costa had no clear idea how to handle this. But then, he guessed, neither did Gianni Peroni.

The two small Roman temples that sat beside the Piazza della Bocca della Verità were just beyond the window, a couple of perfect, circular shapes from a different, Arcadian world. It was a pleasant day with enough warmth in it to indicate spring was on the way. Nic Costa wished he could sit next to them for a while, thinking.

Peroni turned to stare at him. 'Shall we have the clearing of the air conversation now?'

Costa looked into that intense, battered face and wondered how long it would take him to get used to sharing a car with someone who looked like a cartoon villain. 'If you want.'

'Let me be candid. It's not so long since you went loony tunes. You did the drink thing too. Me, I just got

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caught with my pants down with a Czech hooker. For that I have to be the rehab warder. The way I see it is that if I can keep you straight for a month or so, and who knows maybe along the way we deal with a few criminals, I can get myself back in Leo's good books. I can start climbing the ladder to what I do best, which is running a team, not sitting in some stinking squad car playing nursemaid to junior and keeping him away from the bottle. This is important to me, kid. I'll do my best to keep Leo happy. But you have to help me. The sooner you do, the sooner you have me out of your hair and get someone normal. Understand?'

Costa nodded.

'And let me tell you something else. *I hate* the drink thing. I have watched too many men turn into boozed-up pieces of shit in my time. You do that to me and I will feel very cross indeed. You wouldn't like me when I'm cross. No one does.'

'I'll try to remember that. Do I get something in return? A promise you'll stay away from hookers?'

Peroni glared at him and Costa, in spite of himself, couldn't help feeling a little scared. 'Don't push it now. I know Leo's looking out for you. The stupid bastard feels guilty for what happened when you got shot. God knows why. From what I hear you got yourself into that mess.'

Costa refused to rise to the bait. 'No I mean it. I'm curious. Everyone thought they knew you. This stand-up, working-class guy with the perfect family, the perfect life. And now they think they got it wrong all along. And they wonder: was it them, or was it you? Who was doing the lying?'

'Me,' Peroni said immediately. 'But let me tell you.

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Everyone's got that little dark spot inside them. Everyone wonders what it would be like to take it out for a walk once in a while. Even you. If you know what's good for you.'

'I thought that's what you didn't want to happen.'

'I was talking about the drink. People who go that way do it for one purpose. To kill something. Maybe it'd be better if they did let the dark side out instead. Just now and again.'

It was a kind of philosophy, Costa thought. Not one he expected from a cop, or the kind of cop Gianni Peroni was supposed to be.

'And you tell me something, kid. I saw you walking into the building today with Barbara Martelli. Isn't she the loveliest thing in the world? What if she just turned round one day, just when you were happily married and thought everything was stretching out neatly in front of you, just when you're feeling a little old too. What if she said: *Nic, I just wished I knew what it was like. Just the once. Where's the harm? Who's to know?*'

'I'm not married.'

'I *know*. I said, what if?' Peroni waited for an answer and realized it wasn't coming. 'You should ask that girl out. She's got something in her eyes when she looks at you. I notice these things.'

Costa laughed. 'Really?'

'Really. And let me tell you one more thing. I knew her old man. He was in vice too until a couple of years ago. One of the meanest, most miserable bastards you ever saw. How he ever spawned a woman like that is beyond me. There. You got a good reason not to date her. You'd have to meet that old sonofabitch.'

'Thanks.'

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‘You’re welcome. You look like the sort of person who appreciates reasons for not doing things. Which is fine by me, until I talk myself out of this seat. Do we understand each other?’

Costa didn’t get mad. In a way he felt relieved. At least he knew where he stood.

‘Is that out of the way now?’ he wondered. ‘Can we just settle down to being old cop, young cop, cleaning up the streets of Rome?’

But the big man in the passenger seat was waving at him to be quiet. The radio was squealing their number. Peroni picked up the mike and answered. They listened to the call. Nic Costa gunned the car and headed straight for Piramide and the *autostrada* out to the coast and the airport, casually flicking on the blue light and the siren to get the cars out of the way.

‘What a day,’ Peroni groaned. ‘First I get baby-sitting duties. Now we’re the fire brigade. Hard to know which is worse.’

Bobby Dexter’s determined expression was one Lianne recognized. It usually meant they were headed for trouble.

‘I’ll tell you what we’re going to do,’ he said. ‘We’re going to take back a head for Tom Jorgensen to look at. One that’s a million times better than that piece of Greek shit of his.’

She gaped at him, outraged. ‘What?’

Bobby raised the shovel to shoulder height, holding it like an axe, a little breathless already from the anticipation. ‘Watch. Watch and learn.’

He brought the metal down hard; where the statue’s

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neck ought to be. Nothing much happened. Some dirt moved. But Lianne was yelling, louder than she'd ever done before.

'Bobby Dexter,' she screeched. 'What the hell are you doing? This thing's like a piece of art or something. It's history. You're just going to smash it to pieces so you can make out your dick's bigger than Tom Jorgensen's?'

He held the shovel high, swaying slightly. 'What do you know about the size of Jorgensen's dick?'

'It was a figure of speech, moron.'

Bobby Dexter blinked at her. He looked downright ugly. The light was failing now and the world was getting weird. He took one more swipe at the statue's neck and missed, sending up a shower of stinking earth that bounced straight back into his face. A few grains fell into his mouth. He spat out the dirt as if it were poison.

'If you break that statue, we're over, Bobby,' she said, dead serious. 'I mean it. I don't go talking to my father. I get a lawyer. The moment we get back to Seattle.'

He hesitated, staring at her as if wondering whether she really did mean it . . . 'You tell me that when we're back home with the best fucking piece of coffee table statuary in private ownership anywhere in Washington State. You'd be amazed what a nice piece of household ornamentation can do for dinner parties.'

'Bobby—' she yelled.

'Bullshit.' He took a final swing.

This one connected. The sharp side of the spade went deep into the neck. There should have been a sharp, cracking sound that indicated a good clean break, one that went right across the stone in a level line with just enough randomness in it to look convincing. She knew

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Bobby well enough to understand what he was thinking. There were probably ideas in his head already.

But everything just went straight out of their heads a moment after the blade hit. Lianne Dexter realized right then that they'd been wrong, terribly wrong, both of them. They saw what they wanted to see. Not what *was*. Maybe there was a reason behind that. Because what *was* turned out to be the last thing they wanted to encounter anywhere on this planet, least of all on their own down a little lane, next to a stinking grey river in a country where their language skills extended only to ordering pizza, beer and wine.

The blade didn't strike hard stone. It met flesh, a kind of flesh anyway. Something that looked like leather, tanned, tough, but supple. The side of the spade cut straight through just where the neck met the shoulders, severing something that resembled a real human tendon, spattering both of them with a mixture of foul-smelling wet mud that seemed to have something distinctly organic, almost alive, inside it.

Lianne's face was covered with the peat gore that had spat back at them when he attacked the thing. She was spitting bits of it out of her mouth, sobbing, dry-retching as she did so.

She stopped for a moment and watched Bobby bend down to look closely at the thing, just a hint of reverence in his face.

On the ground in front of them, partly severed from the body by the spade, was the head of a young girl, sixteen, seventeen, no more, dressed in a classical gown, holding some large, ceremonial wand in her left hand. The force of the blow had removed most of the solid cake of peat that had sat on her features. What they

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saw now was her face which, beneath the crud, seemed beautiful. She had a high forehead and prominent cheekbones. There wasn't a wrinkle in sight on her flawless leather skin. Her eyes were closed. Her lips were partly open as if she were uttering a final, dying sigh. She had perfect teeth which were just closed together with a hint of pearly whiteness showing through the brown stain of the earth. Her long hair was tied back behind her neck and matted into solid strands. Her expression was one of utmost peace. She looked, Lianne Dexter thought, happy, which was, she knew, ridiculous in the circumstances.

And just in case they were in any doubt about the nature of this object before them there was the matter of the neck. When Bobby had come down hard with the shovel he'd done what he hoped: split through into the interior. Bobby and Lianne Dexter were now looking at the inside of another human being's throat and it was black and complicated and messy, with bones and sinews and passages that looked vaguely familiar from some distant school lesson in anatomy.

'Holy shit,' Bobby muttered and started shivering.

A 747 swooped low over them. They felt the heat of its breath. They inhaled the chemical stink of its fearsome engines. When the roar of its gross presence diminished Bobby Dexter became aware of another noise. It was his wife, screaming.

'No,' he pleaded. 'Not now, Lianne. I'm trying to think for chrissake.'

Then he gave up altogether. Two men, one short, one tall, were walking towards them, staring intently. Some way behind them there was something else: a red

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fire engine struggling down the lane trying to reach the charred and smoking remains of the Clio.

The men were waving badges. They didn't look sympathetic.

The older cop was a bull-necked gorilla with a disfigured, scowling face and piercing, aggressive eyes that looked as if they could see everything. The younger, shorter one was staring at the thing in the ground, the shit-coloured cadaver with the head all to one side where Bobby had lopped it with the shovel.

'This day just gets stranger,' Gianni Peroni murmured. 'Pinch me. Tell me I'm dreaming.'

'You're not dreaming,' Nic Costa replied. He couldn't stop looking at the object half-hidden in the mud. Not for the weeping woman who looked as if she'd thrown up and was now hunched in a ball down by the edge of the river. Or the man, who held a shovel uncertainly in his hands, his body swaying rhythmically.

A man who, for no reason at all, suddenly pointed the spade at both of them and, with a slow, effortful slur to his voice, said, 'Listen. Don't fuck with me. Don't even think about it. I'm an American citizen.'